

James Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and “Acceptable” Forms of Black Power Protest

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the amorphous nature of Black Power as a slogan or concept can be seen to have rendered it particularly vulnerable to appropriation, whether cultural, political, or otherwise. In focusing on the media representation of Stokely Carmichael and James Brown following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968, it explores how King’s death and the ensuing civil unrest provided the opportunity for media outlets and political leaders to reconfigure popular understandings of and promote different “forms” of Black Power activism.

“QUESTION: What is Black Power, Daddy? ANSWER: ‘?’” The opening statement from Charles H. Fuller’s 1979 piece perhaps best surmises the dominant scholarly approach to the study of Black Power in the United States (as cited in Torrubia, 2011, p. 1). Gaining popular recognition following the rallying cry of newly elected SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael at the Meredith March in 1966, Black Power remains a misunderstood and controversial part of American history, most commonly recognized as a radical and destructive transcript to the “mainstream” movement.¹ In contrast to the attention lavished on the accepted “Civil Rights years” of the 1950s and early 1960s, Winston Van Horne (2007) suggests that today “it seems

¹ Carmichael resigned from SNCC leadership in 1967, to be replaced by H. Rap Brown, and would go on to become “honorary prime minister” of the Black Panther Party. While Carmichael’s assertion that “What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!” was jumped on by media outlets, the origin of the term is often attributed to Richard Wright and his same titled 1950s book on African politics. Other Black political figures such as Adam Clayton Powell had used the phrase in the early 1960s, but it gained popular recognition following Carmichael’s address at the Meredith March. See Three jailed in Greenwood, 1966; Stokely says arms due for fight, 1967.

almost quaint to hear the term *Black Power*. The symbol and substance of the black-gloved and tightly clenched fists... no longer animate the intense passions that they once did” (p. 366), as if the concept’s radical potential has been lost in the process of academization (Ferguson, 2012; Johnson, 2007; Rojas, 2007; Rooks, 2006). Similarly, scholars such as William Van Deburg and Monique Guillory have repositioned Black Power as a force that was essentially if not exclusively cultural, but have also drawn attention to the multiple ways in which it has been utilized and commoditized as a cultural force (Guillory & Green, 1998; Van Deburg, 1992, 1997). From medallions in *Ebony* magazine to Mike Tyson energy drink commercials, Black Power may no longer be seen as politically viable, but continues to eminently sellable. Consider the example of Black Panther Party cofounder Bobby Seale, who became an advertising front-man for Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream in the 1990s (Beltrone, 2012; Ongiri, 2010; Power Inc., 1969; Tommie Smith selling, 2010). *New York Times* reporter Claudia Dreifus (1994) addressed the unlikely partnership and Seale’s apparent transformation from ice-cool militant to ice cream salesman in an interview with company cofounders Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield.

Q: You have ex-Black Panther Bobby Seale on your new advertising campaign. Does he sell ice cream?

BEN: Is he the guy on the poster who says, “Vanilla?” He says it very well.

Q: In many ways, your company has become one of the major custodians of the ideals and values of the 1960’s. Do you find that ironic?

BEN: It humbles us. Who would have guessed that fat little old nerdy Ben and Jerry would be the keepers of the 1960’s flame? Perhaps it’s fitting for an ice-cream company to be the keepers of 60’s values. Ice cream is fun. It’s happy. The 60’s were a wonderful time and the values of the 60’s were serious and happy: peace, love, fairness, equality.

It is debatable whether Seale’s own description of the 60’s would match Cohen’s glib analysis, but this example illustrates the malleable potential of Black Power activism not only as a result of popular consumption, but as a consequence of the concept itself.

This paper argues that the amorphous nature of Black Power as a slogan or concept can be seen to have rendered it particularly vulnerable to appropriation, whether cultural, political or otherwise. More specifically, I investigate the connection between James Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and Black Power negotiated through American newspapers in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968. King's assassination presented a moment of profound crisis for the United States, but his death and the ensuing civil unrest also provided the opportunity for media outlets and political leaders to reconfigure popular understandings of Black Power. While it is difficult to mark a definitive endpoint to unrest, Peter Levy's denotation of the "Holy Week Uprising" provides a useful chronological framework, with the bulk of disturbances confined to the period between April 4th and April 10th.² Focusing on a core sample of newspaper articles covering the three-week period following King's death on April 4th until April 25th, this paper examines the respective roles and representation of James Brown and Stokely Carmichael in the civil unrest following King's death—how their roles were represented in the media, how this representation was linked to particular "forms" of Black Power activism, and the degree to which these "forms" were verified or vilified by the national press.³

² This period marked the high point in reaction to King's death, although civil unrest continued sporadically until the end of April and indeed throughout the summer of 1968. See Levy, 2011.

³ My core sample consisted of 75 articles compiled from major national newspapers located through searches on Proquest and associated databases alongside regional and local newspaper coverage through Google Newspaper Archives. I also utilized salient articles from outside this timeframe to help contextualize the respective positions and actions of Brown and Carmichael. The newspapers included in my survey were the *Amsterdam News*, *Baltimore Afro American*, *Bay State Banner*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Daily Defender*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Free Lance Star*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *New Pittsburgh Courier*, *New York Times*, *Time Daily*, and the *Washington Post*. The articles were found using key word or phrase searches, including "James Brown," "Stokely Carmichael," "James Brown riots," "Stokely Carmichael riots," "James Brown Martin Luther King," "Stokely Carmichael Martin Luther King," "James Brown Black Power," and "Stokely Carmichael Black Power." I make no claim to presenting a comprehensive or complete account of newspaper coverage of these figures in the period examined—rather the articles I use are intended to show how their respective roles in the riots were dominantly presented and the extent to which this representation was linked to the public image of their own Black Power ideology.

As Paul Gilroy (1987) asserts, Black Power can be understood as a “malleable idea appropriated by a variety of contrasting and sometimes directly opposed concerns,” resulting in an ideology with a plurality of meanings that covered a spectrum of political sentiment (p. 176). Of course, this particular reading of Black Power raises another important question—the extent to which it was presented as a fragmented or incoherent ideology as an attempt to blunt its analytical incision and political potential. However, I argue that this “plurality of meanings” identified by Gilroy, regardless of their origin, allowed different “forms” of Black Power to be presented, contrasted, and mediated. In the case study outlined here, we can see how it enabled popular cultural icons, such as entertainer James Brown, not only to become important figures within the Black Power Movement, but to act as tropes for a particular image of Black Power that could be contrasted against more “radical” advocates, such Bobby Seale or—as detailed in this paper—Stokely Carmichael.

By referring to “forms” in quotation marks here I argue that the Black Power sentiments expressed by Brown and Carmichael should not be read simply as distinct or oppositional ideologies and that we should be aware of the potential for external influences to create and mediate divisions between different “forms” of Black Power activism to negate its liberating potential as a unifying goal or strategy. Similarly, by placing the term “radical” within quotation marks, I do not intend to suggest that Seale or Carmichael were politically moderate per se, but that the extent of their radicalism—at least in forms where it can be read as a trope for inflammatory and violent rhetoric and tendencies—was often exaggerated.⁴ Finally, this paper does not intend to detract from Brown’s role within the Black Power Movement, but to highlight

⁴ This ties into a broader concern pertaining to popular understanding of Black Power, which conflates the notion of radicalism with violent dissent—militancy can take many forms, and we could argue that many aspects of Black Panther Party activism and social involvement, such as free busing and breakfasts for school children, were just as “radical” as the highly stylized accounts of violent altercations with law enforcement.

how the cultural significance of figures such as Brown created the opportunity for prominent American politicians and media outlets to legitimate or denigrate different forms of Black Power protest at key moments in American history. This paper follows from the work of Clay Risen (2009), which strongly criticized the media representation of Carmichael following King's assassination.⁵ In doing so, it adds to a growing body of literature that has sought to more critically assess the media representation of Black Power, both as a concept and in relation to specific figures or events, such as the murder of Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Black Panther Illinois chapter, by FBI agents in December 1969.⁶

Literature Review

Critics have continued to find a single definition of Black Power elusive and have often resorted to multifaceted and somewhat reductionist categorizations such as the one outlined below.

In politics, black power was synonymous with independent black action and exercise of power in the urban ghettos.... economically, black power called for the creation of independent, self-sufficient black business enterprises through the encouragement of black entrepreneurs and the formation of black cooperatives. In the area of education, black power theoreticians demanded local community control of public schools in predominantly black neighbourhoods. Essentially, black power stressed self-help, racial unity and voluntary segregation. (White, 1990, pp. 175–176)

Perhaps the most comprehensive early attempt to define Black Power was put forward in Carmichael and Hamilton's 1967 study of the same name, where the authors outlined the fundamental premise that "before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By

⁵ As Risen (2009) asserts, "Too many people still think Stokely Carmichael caused the Washington riot. This book will show why they're wrong." (p. 8).

⁶ See Cleaver & Katsiaficas, 2001; Schultz & Schultz, 2001. For more information on the case of Fred Hampton, see "A nation of law? (1968–1971)" from the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the prize*. See also Aranke, 2013; Haas, 2010.

this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society” (p. 44). However, because of the often conflicting definitions of the concept endorsed by different Black Power advocates, the only element on which many could agree was the need for greater Black pride and self-determination. This meant that definitions of Black Power could be substantially altered to suit the particular intentions or demands of political figures, groups and organizations far removed from the ideological position of activists such as Carmichael and considered “outside” the movement itself.⁷ Two key examples of this can be seen through the publication of the Kerner Report in February 1968 and Richard Nixon’s “Bridges to Human Dignity” speech just weeks after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968.

Nixon’s speech on April 25 illustrates how Black Power could be reconfigured to suit a specific political strategy. The presidential candidate advocated Black ownership as a route toward “black pride, black jobs, black opportunity, and yes, black power in the best, the constructive sense of that often misapplied term” (as cited in Weems, 2009, p. 115). Nixon’s framing of Black Power highlights not only the ways in which its malleability allowed the term to be endorsed by unlikely political figures, but also the way in which it was mediated discursively by prominent politicians and the American press as a slogan. Robert E. Weems (2009) suggests that Nixon’s attempts to gain support from Black militant leaders were “not as inconceivable as it may appear on the surface,” but can be understood as part of a concerted attempt to win minority support alongside the implementation of his “Southern strategy” (p. 114).

⁷ Many different and often conflicting interpretations or definitions of Black Power emerged from “inside” and “outside” the movement. See Aberbach & Walker, 1970, pp. 369–371; Cleaver, 1991; Handler, 1966; Lardner, Jr., & Morgan, 1966; The many meanings of “Black Power,” 1967; McKee, 1966; Newton & Black, 1973; Schweid, 1966; Seale, 1970.

Less than two months prior to Nixon's speech, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders had published its findings regarding the series of urban riots that had occurred over the previous 3 years.⁸ The commission's report was hugely influential, and its findings played an important role in framing popular conceptions of Black Power. In its most famous proclamation, the Kerner Report (1968) warned that "our nation is moving towards two societies... one black, one white—separate and unequal" (p. 1). Regarding media representations of the riots and race relations in the United States, the report criticized newspapers and television for failing to adequately report on African American life and for presenting a "significant imbalance between what actually happened in our cities and what the newspaper, radio and television coverage of the riots told us happened" (as cited in Rucker & Upton, 2007, p. 819). However, while the Kerner Report highlighted the extent to which media coverage could frame and distort public opinion and reception of social realities and political ideologies, Amelia Benner argues that the commission viewed Black Power as a "major part of the problem in racial violence." Benner (2008) contends that the report reflected fears of a coming "race-war" shared by many White Americans and highlights the commission's mistrust and misunderstanding of Black Power as a concept (p. 54).

Factors including but not limited to the insular and polemical nature of much early literature and the association of the concept with violence by politicians and media have impacted popular representation, which continues to be formulated around a series of iconic and static images. Black Panther members raising gloved fists in salute or wanted posters for Angela Davis serve as a form of "visual shorthand" to understanding the concept and philosophy of Black Power, but reveal very little about the cultural, economic, and sociopolitical milieu from which it emerged (Davis, 1994, pp. 37–39; Joseph, 2009, p. 751). As a result, critics such as

⁸ Also known as the Kerner Commission after its chair, Illinois State Governor Otto Kerner.

Dianne Pinderhughes (1977) were happy to focus on the “failures” of Black Power, and its dislocation from within its broader historical context has meant that the movements “antiwar activism, antipoverty efforts, foreign policy interventions, intellectual and political debates, local character and national influence have been virtually ignored in the historiography of postwar America” (Joseph, 2008, p. 8).

Over the past two decades a number of scholars, including Peniel E. Joseph, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, and Judson L. Jeffries, have worked tirelessly to broaden the complexity and scope of Black Power scholarship and to critically reengage with overlooked activists and actors to demystify and complicate the study of Black Power politics.⁹ As a result, we have seen a move away from treatment of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as two separate entities and toward an understanding of a more cohesive and long-term Black freedom struggle.¹⁰ Other scholars have highlighted the extent to which state endorsed attempts to discredit Black Power and undermine key organizations and activists affected the concept’s impact and popular representation, alongside the impact of bias in media reporting.¹¹ Rather than characterizing Civil Rights and Black Power in terms of stick or twist, Manning Marable (1991) has suggested that Black Power “simply completed the evolution from integrationist to black nationalist ideologies” that had to some extent always been a part of the “mainstream” movement (p. 95).

Vincent Harding’s (1990) assertion that historians have been sluggish in recognizing the cultural significance and impact of postwar activism and resistance has prompted a number of scholars to reposition Black Power as a primarily cultural force and to emphasize the contributions of musicians, athletes, and cultural icons to the movement.¹² In his 1997 study

⁹ See Collins, 2006; Jeffries, 2006; Joseph, 2006, 2010; Lazerow & Williams, 2006; Ogbar, 2004.

¹⁰ See Joseph, 2001, 2002.

¹¹ See Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002; Davenport, 2009; Jeffrey-Jones, 2007; Weiner, 2012.

¹² See also Guillory & Green, 1998; Van Deburg, 1992, 1997; Ward, 1998, 2001; Woodard, 1999.

Black Camelot, Van Deburg identified James Brown as a “black culture hero” who, alongside other real and fictional African American musicians, athletes, urban madmen, and “superhero” detectives, had a major impact on a national, multiracial constituency and helped to fuel Black Power activism through serving “both as a projection of dreams and as a model for emulation” (pp. 1-2). In doing so, he echoed the words of Amiri Baraka in the poet’s seminal work *Blues People*, where Baraka emphasized the symbolic resonance of Black music and, by extension, musicians as “an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, beaten, corollary confirmation of the history” (as quoted in Baraka, 2009, p. 30).

Following James Brown’s death in 2006, commentators were quick to link him to Black Power as a figure of racial uplift who, as “the very embodiment of black pride” personified a key component of the Black Power ethos (James Brown, *Godfather of soul*, 2006; Parelles, 2006). Brown’s link to Black Power has been further endorsed through David Leaf’s 2008 documentary *The Night James Brown Saved Boston* and James Sullivan’s book *The Hardest Working Man*, which focused on Brown’s concert in Boston the night after King’s death. In doing so they echoed the words of earlier writers such as Doon Arbus (2008) of the *New York Herald Tribune* and Jonathan Cott (2008) from *Rolling Stone* magazine who depicted the singer as a bastion of racial authenticity and a “modern Moses” (p. 28). Just weeks before King’s assassination, John Lewis (1968) would champion Brown as living Black Power “in fancy stepping, song screaming living color” (p. 22). Carmichael himself had alluded to this connection in 1966, chiding Black intellectuals for failing to embody Black cultural ideals in *Ebony* magazine and asserting that “we are not culturally deprived. We are the only people who have a culture in America. We don’t have to be ashamed of James Brown” (Bennett, Jr., 1966, p. 30).

Carmichael, Brown, and Black Power

The connection between Brown, Carmichael, and Black Power can be traced to the origin of the phrase, at least as it is attributed to Carmichael, in the summer of 1966.¹³ James Meredith's "March against Fear" from Memphis to Jackson had been halted after less than 30 miles when he was gunned down by a lone White assailant near Hernando, Mississippi. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Race Equality, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee aligned to continue Meredith's march (Meredith marchers issue manifesto, 1966). The relationship between the marching activists and state troopers remained fractious and Carmichael was arrested and placed in jail as the march reached Greenwood, Mississippi, on June 16th. He was released just minutes before the rally began (Sellers, 1990, pp. 166–167). Carmichael fumed that "this is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested, and I ain't going to jail no more! The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over.... What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" (as cited in Joseph, 2010, p. 119). The cry was taken up by marchers and jumped on by media outlets, although Carmichael rejected the suggestion that it was a new slogan, contending that "we'd been talking about nothing else in the Delta for years. The only difference was that this time the national media were there" (as cited in Carmichael, 2005, p. 507). On June 25, the protesters reached the edge of Jackson, where James Brown awaited at Tougaloo College to perform as part of a benefit concert (Hunt, 1966; McKee, 1968). Following his set, an announcer thanked the crowd, proclaiming "you have just witnessed the rest of this show. This here's black power, baby" (as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 156).

¹³ As previously expressed, Black Power as a term had been used extensively by previous figures, such as Adam Clayton Powell, but gained popular recognition following Carmichael's speech on the Meredith March.

The radical potential of Brown as a Black Power advocate is undoubtedly appealing, although it is something of a leap from acknowledging Brown's rhetorical and musical links with the concept to describing him as a politically cogent leader. Brown's definition of Black Power tended toward the vague, describing it as "what you can do for you people" (as cited in Lewis, 1968, p. 22). The singer admitted that "I've never voted myself. I cast my vote another way... I've never marched in my life, either" and was careful to describe himself as a humanitarian as opposed to a politician (Brown & Tucker, 1987, p. 171). This should not detract from Brown's contributions within the Black community—his donations to educational and welfare projects were significant, and were markedly influenced by his own Black Power ideology.¹⁴

However, we should recognize that this did not constitute a long-term economic strategy for Black advancement. Brown offered no progressive plan for economic improvement apart from his own model of success in the form of entrepreneurship and ownership of Black businesses, which was an unrealistic option for the majority of Black Americans (Irons, 1976, p. 14). Furthermore, his rhetoric enabled external sources to interpret his relationship to Black Power on their own terms. When Brown bought Knoxville radio station WJBE in January 1968, the *New York Amsterdam News* took the opportunity to declare that the singer's actions had "shown what Black Power is and means" (Singer Brown buys station, 1968, p. 1). The presentation of Brown as a force for a moderate and "constructive" form of Black Power was set against an increasingly negative portrayal of Carmichael in the press, who was frequently blamed for instigating riots and civil unrest.¹⁵ In February 1968, the *Boston Globe* warned that Carmichael was "set to pounce" and could rise to "dangerous eminence" within the Black

¹⁴ In 1970, Mike Ogbeide of the *Sunday Observer* outlined Brown's investment in the Black community through jobs schemes and financial aid, reporting that "James Brown is reputed for giving more of his money and time to the ghettos than any other black performer in the US." See Ogbeide, 2008.

¹⁵ Carmichael became a recurring target for blame regarding rioting in the years following his Meredith speech. See Riots in 3 cities laid to Brown and Carmichael, 1967; Yuenger, 1968.

freedom struggle (Evans & Novak, 1968a). The anxiety expressed by such news reports reflected those of FBI Director Hoover, who marked Carmichael as a potential “black messiah” (Warden, 1976). This anxiety in part stemmed from an increasing fear of the potential for Carmichael and other activists to develop a unifying Black Power agenda. After all, Carmichael was “arguably the only leader charismatic enough to build any semblance of a coherent black activist community after King” (Risen, 2009, p. 9).

The willingness of others to champion Brown’s Black Power credentials arguably reveals more about external desires to frame it than the merits of Brown’s own Black Power ideology. Michael Hanson (2008) argues that the singer can be best understood as a “primary emblem of black ingroup feeling... which, when rubbed against the mainstream politics and culture of the day, became politicized” (p. 358). The dream of Brown developing a radical Black Power philosophy that echoed the stance of Carmichael was unlikely, with Richard Iton (2008) suggesting that the most radical thing about Brown in the late 1960s was his musical evolution (p. 228). However, Brown’s perceived authenticity as a “race man” meant that he bridged an important space between younger activists, such as Carmichael and the King generation. R. J. Smith (2012) argues that whether he realized it or not, Brown “became a cultural politician the moment he stepped off the plane in Jackson” at the Meredith March (p. 156). The singer assessed his own political value in terms of perspective: “I was providing the Democrats with one of the few non-white views they had of things from the street... Dr. King himself wasn’t a street person. I was” (Brown & Tucker, 1987, pp. 171–172). This street-smart political value would be put to the test in the wake of King’s death.

April 1968 and “Acceptable” Forms of Black Power Protest

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, presented a major crisis for the United States. While King’s critics had become more numerous over the years leading up to his death, he still demanded unparalleled respect and admiration.¹⁶ Michael Eric Dyson (2008) asserts for many Blacks King remained “the key to a righteous black future, one that threatened to slip away on the horns of a racial dilemma” (p. 49). The preeminent Black Civil Rights activist, political figurehead, and prophet of nonviolence had been violently stuck down and his followers could either maintain King’s insistence on nonviolence, albeit in a more aggressive manifestation, or turn their support toward Black Power and more militant routes to racial justice.

James Brown was with his band in New York, having just returned from Africa, when the ensemble learned of King’s death. The immediate concern was whether a major show in Boston, which was scheduled for the following day, would go ahead (Smith, 2012, p. 189). Reflecting on King’s death in his autobiography, Brown mused that “when a great man is killed for no reason and he happens to be your friend, you feel the loss twice over” (Brown & Tucker, 1987, p. 183). The singer immediately began to give statements to Black radio stations, urging calm and restraint from violent retaliation (Smith, 2012, p. 189). The following day, Brown arrived in Boston unsure of whether his concert would go ahead, with the city’s Black community seemingly poised for upheaval (Taylor, Jr., 1968). Mayor Kevin White was worried that the concert would incite reaction in Roxbury, the city’s major Black enclave. However, instead of cancelling the concert, the decision was made to broadcast it live in an attempt to keep people off the streets, although an argument over Brown’s fee provided a sticking point as the singer stood

¹⁶ Carmichael noted in his April 5 news conference that King was “the one man of our race that this country’s older generations, the militants and the revolutionaries and the masses of black people would still listen to. Even though sometimes he did not agree with them, they would still listen to him” (We’re not afraid, 1968).

to lose gate revenue from the decision to televise his performance (Johnson, 1968; Sullivan, 2009, pp. 143–145; Lukas, 1985, pp. 32–33).

At the same moment that Brown was performing, other American cities were descending into chaos; however in Boston the expected riots did not materialize (Brown, 2009, p. 124; Leaf, 2008; Response to a crisis, 1968). The combination of Atkins, White, and Brown had apparently worked to ensure that the situation did not escalate. As news of the King’s death spread, riots began to break out across America—within days, over 125 cities had experienced major disturbances and over 20,000 had been arrested (Another opinion, 1968; Franklin, 1968; Johnson, 1968b; Sniper fire, 1968; Steen, 1968; United Press International, 1968; Voices of reason, 1968). Brown’s role in Boston had thrust him into the national spotlight and, as rioting escalated on a national scale, he was summoned to Washington, D.C., by the mayor (World mourns Dr. King, 1968). Appearing on radio and television, Brown urged rioters to cool it, calling for Black Power through education and economic advancements (Don’t burn, 1968; Thousands in tears, 1968). Albert Goldman (2008) of the *New York Times* later proclaimed Brown as the “one man in America who can stop a race riot in its tracks” and painted the singer’s Washington role in a positively heroic light—“Brown plunged right into the streets, grabbing hangs of marauding kids, talking to them like men but sending them back home like a tough uncle” (p. 39). The entertainer explicitly linked his conception of power to an autobiographical narrative of racial uplift, charting his path from childhood poverty in Georgia to wealth and fame. He declared that, “I shined shoes in front of the radio station in August... well now I own that station.... That’s what I call Black Power. It’s got some green in it” (Payne, 1968a).

It would appear somewhat ironic that image conscious musicians and artists appeared at times of crisis to help moderate tensions that were in part created by “the music’s more

aggressively anti-institutional tendencies” (Van Deburg, 1997, p. 232). However, the way in which many media outlets picked up on Brown’s vocalization of the Black Power philosophy is worth considering in more detail. The *Milwaukee Journal* suggested that, by asking for Brown’s help, the social role of Black artists had been given top recognition by the establishment and argued that Black entertainers could exert significant political and social meaning within the ghetto (West, 1968). While it was impossible to prove that Brown’s role in Boston had been decisive in averting violence, the appeal was undeniable—“King could not stop a riot, but James Brown could” (Smith, 2012, p. 193). The *Wall Street Journal* noted that, while Brown may have seemed an unlikely apostle of nonviolence, “one could hardly have found a more effective one last Friday night” (Hunt, 1968). The *Boston Globe* and other news sources highlighted Brown’s numerous references to Black Power during and after the show, which was rerun on Boston channels throughout the night and over subsequent days and in his Washington address (Brown & Tucker, 1987, p. 187; Johnson, 1968b; Taylor, Jr., 1968). The *Pittsburgh Courier* credited Brown with making a significant contribution through his television appearance, although it wryly noted that, “His plea was excellent. Unfortunately the looters were carrying the color sets home and didn’t have them plugged in” (Dafrooth, 1968).

News reports emphasized a form of Black Power as exercised by Brown that was both knowable and controllable. The singer told and retold the same story of his success and endorsed Black Power in formulaic and moderate terms, allowing reports to emphasize his position as a “former shoeshine boy who became a millionaire singing star” and the safe, economic potential of the Black Power concept within a capitalist society (Don’t burn, James Brown urges, 1968). Brown can be seen as a go-to figure at a moment of crisis, consistently depicted as “helping out” and playing a largely reassuring and supportive role (James Brown helps out, 1968). The

Chicago Tribune stressed that Brown arrived in Washington, D.C., at the request of Mayor Walter Washington, and Ethel Payne relayed Mayor Walter Washington's order to "find James Brown wherever he is and ask him to come down here" (Don't burn, James Brown urges, 1968; Payne, 1968a). The singer would continue to play the peacemaker in subsequent disturbances, reiterating his message to "cool it" on his return to the capital in October amid rumors that he had been shot by a White policeman (Payne, 1968b).

Carmichael was in Washington, D.C., waiting for his partner Miriam Makeba to return from a cancelled show in Los Angeles when he learned of King's demise. In his autobiography, Carmichael (2005) recalled that, along with other members of Washington's SNCC chapter, he went out to neighborhood stores, "asking all businesses to close as a sign of mourning and respect." This version of events was supported by Cleveland Sellers (1990), who detailed the group's attempts to dissuade community reaction, although by late evening "it was obvious that we could do nothing to dissuade the people. They intended to have some kind of revenge" (p. 232). In an "unusually diplomatic" move, Carmichael and his SNCC colleagues advised the increasingly restless crowd to take it easy, before retreating back to Carmichael's apartment (Joseph, 2010, p. 155). Phil Casey (1968) of the *Washington Post* reported that Carmichael had told Blacks to "go home" following King's death. Risen (2009) stressed that Carmichael intended not to incite the crowd, but to contain the simmering anger, suggesting that his actions indicated that Carmichael "could bring peace, and not just agitation, to the black community" (p. 47). Furthermore, Risen argues that when Carmichael saw that the situation was escalating beyond his control, he beat a hasty retreat, realizing that "the night was lost. Even more, he realized he would get blamed. And indeed he was" (Risen, 2009, p. 63). The following morning, on April 5, Carmichael would prove to be less of a mediating presence. Speaking at a news

conference, Carmichael predicted an escalation of violence, announcing that “when white America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us... we have to retaliate for the deaths of our leaders. The execution for those deaths will not be in the courtrooms, they will be in the streets of the United States of America” (Casey, 1968. See also Sellers, 1990, p. 234).

In contrast to the image of Carmichael on the night of April 4 outlined above, many sources contended that Carmichael was “preaching revolution and inciting violence” from the beginning (So far, well done, 1968). Former Black Panther Aaron Dixon (2012) recalls seeing Carmichael on television “holding a .22 caliber-pistol, shouting, ‘it’s now time to burn, burn, baby, burn!’” (p. 73). The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Carmichael would face a gun charge for brandishing a pistol as he led an angry crowd “in the early moments of Washington’s disorder” (Ostrow, 1968), while the *New York Times* depicted Carmichael as leading “scattered but persistent looting and vandalism” on the night of April 4 (Looting in Washington, 1968) and reported his apparent declaration that “the time has come for guns,” with reporter Steven Roberts (1968) identifying Carmichael as an “instigator and a rallying point for the anger of black youth” (Carmichael says, 1968).

While the *Times* reported that Carmichael had been seen at Howard University armed and yelling, “Don’t loot, shoot!,” the source for this apparent sighting later emerged to be a 13-year-old messenger boy, “whom the *Times* has been reluctant to make available” (Pearson, 1968). Irrespective of the validity of claims made against Carmichael, the *New Pittsburgh Courier* noted that he fitted “the first reaction ugly mood of black youth exhibited immediately after Dr. King’s assassination” (Will new “King” emerge?, 1968). Governor of Maryland Spiro Agnew contended that the riots were pre-meditated and that it was “no coincidence” that Carmichael was seen in Baltimore meeting other Black Power leaders on April 3, although he did not elaborate

on the far reaching implications of conspiracy imbedded in this statement (U.S. troops exit Chicago, 1968). Other newspapers would argue that Carmichael had incited the looting by marching through the streets forcing shops to close (Van Gelder, 1968; Franklin, 1968). In an article by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, that was reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times* and in other newspapers the following day, its authors announced that Carmichael was back on the streets of Washington on the morning of April 5, “leading a march which preceded waves of new violence” (Evans & Novak, 1968a, 1968b, 1968d).

In contrast to Brown, Carmichael’s actions were connected to a Black Power ideology that was unknown, uncontrollable, and un-American as a form of “mystic” political power (Baker, 1968). Willard Clopton (1968) described an apparently unstable Carmichael screaming at policemen in the context of a “rampage” of looting and burning in Washington, D.C., before presenting Brown as a voice of reason several paragraphs later, as the singer urged citizens to “get off the streets and go home... you can’t do it by blowing up, burning up, stealing and looting” (Asher & Washington, 1968). Several articles linked Carmichael’s actions to communist activities, with Evans and Novak (1968b) citing a “mysterious telephone call from an unknown source” prompting Carmichael into decisive action following King’s death. The authors referenced Carmichael’s “long sojourn” to communist states and posited that the alleged telephone encounter reinforced suspicions that Carmichael was guided through his “otherwise inexplicable shifts of strategy by unseen—and undetermined—forces” (Evans & Novak, 1968b).

On April 9, the *Chicago Tribune* reported the Carmichael was to be investigated by federal and local law enforcement agents on charges of inciting violence. Like Evans and Novak’s (1968b) article, the paper referenced the mysterious phone-call reportedly received by Carmichael, which resulted in his initially measured response to King’s death being “abruptly

changed... to a wildly radical one” (Tell U.S. probe of Carmichael, 1968). The article also noted that Carmichael “travelled extensively in communist countries last year.” This explicit connection between a “bad” form of Black Power and an anti-American, pro-communist ideology had been connected to Carmichael previously, with his anti-war stance being viewed as unpatriotic (Bloom & Martin, 2012, pp. 128–131; FBI links Carmichael, 1967; Kling, 1969). This contrasts with coverage of Brown’s trip to entertain American troops on a 16 day USO tour later in 1968. The *New York Amsterdam News* suggested that Brown fitted the bill as an all American entertainer “well-known not only for the clamor he can cause with his music, but also for his power to cool it for peace, as he proved in Washington” (James Brown, 25 Off, 1968; James Brown tunes up, 1968). More significantly, by suggesting that Carmichael was endorsing a violent and knee-jerk reaction to King’s death, media coverage largely failed to link the riots in Washington to underlying historical causes, in the same way that preceding riots had been dislocated from a longer history of Black resistance to structural inequalities (Theoharis, 2006).

It is unsurprising that Brown’s iteration of Black Power as a moderate and static vision of primarily economic Black self-improvement was viewed as unthreatening by media outlets, while Carmichael, in apparently endorsing a radical and evolutionary conception of Black Power, was disparaged. However, by presenting an “acceptable” form of Black Power activism under the guise of “Black capitalism” or cultural nationalism, American politicians and media outlets could paint an illusion of Black radical expression. As William Lyne (2000) argues, Black cultural nationalism symbolized through figures such as Brown became a “contained Other that gives the illusion of oppositional space, while Black dissent that moves away from race and toward class and economics is excluded from the conversation” (p. 41).

In the months after King's assassination Brown's profile was raised immeasurably by media exposure. His Washington address was entered on the Congressional record and was widely circulated through other media outlets.¹⁷ Conservative magazine *Human Events* reprinted Brown's transcript verbatim alongside an edited transcript of Carmichael's April 5 press conference. The magazine argued that Carmichael's "appetite for violence" was intended to escalate rioting "in vivid contrast to the calm and reasonable advice" given by Brown, and stressed that Brown was not only moderate, but more popular "than Stokely Carmichael or Rap Brown could ever hope to be" (James Brown tells it like it is, 1968). In May, he was invited to the White House for a state reception, where he found a note at his table: "thanks much for what you are doing for your country, Lyndon Johnson" (Smith, 2012, p. 194).

Early in 1969 *Look* magazine ran a cover story on Brown with the title "James Brown: Is he the most important Black man in America?" Article author Thomas Barry (1969) presented the singer as a shining light to the rage of ghetto youth; a "living proof that a black man can make it big—and still come back to listen to their troubles" (p. 56). The article contended that Brown presided over a constituency that dwarfed Carmichael and even the late Dr. King, vowing that, at a time when "millions of hyper-aware young men and women wonder whether it is still possible to be both black and American, James Brown is a new, important leader" (Barry, 1969, p. 56). While Barry did not explicitly label Brown as a Black Power activist, he cemented the connection by noting "at a Black Power conference last fall, playwright-activist LeRoi Jones referred to James Brown as 'our No. 1 black poet'" (p. 62). Critically, he also highlighted Jones's belief that "what Brown needed most of all was a leader"—rearticulating Black Power's potential for "good" in responsible and non-radical hands, but also the inability for advocates of

¹⁷ The singer received extensive coverage after his riot involvement from outlets including *Jet*, *Soul Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *New York*, and *Downbeat* and on television through appearances on *Tonight*, *The Today Show*, *The Merv Griffin Show*, and a special for Metromedia. See Brown, p. 128; Norman, 1971).

“good” Black Power such as Brown to substantiate their vision without White political endorsement and support, in the same way that “Black capitalism,” as a strategy for economic improvement, relied on the endorsement of White political leaders.

This echoed the sentiment put forward in the Kerner Report, which offered three “choices for the future”—a continuation of present policies that would lead to spiraling poverty, a process of enrichment favored by Black Power advocates, or integration (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, pp. 219–221). The “enrichment choice” as depicted by the report would depend on social programs to increase living standards in deprived neighborhoods, which when aligned with Black Power ideologies would provide the potential for self-sufficient and Black controlled communities. However, as Benner (2008) indicates, the report could not explain how increasing White-led social programs within the existing power structure would legislate for Black autonomy and would instead lead to further segregation and inequality within the inner cities (p. 52).

Brown’s raised profile and the praise he received from many media outlets following the riots can be seen as the result of both his conciliatory message and its connection with an “acceptable” Black Power ideology (Shain, 1968). The apparent willingness of many journalists to champion the position of Brown as a Black icon and symbolic of a positive form of Black Power can be understood as an attempt to push primarily non-political figures to the forefront of Black Power consciousness in order to discredit Black Power as a more radical political entity in America.¹⁸ We must question if Brown’s actions and words would have received the same coverage had his Black Power rhetoric during the riots been less conciliatory to the establishment or less saturated with the rhetoric of Nixon’s developing Black capitalism initiative. Every crisis

¹⁸ The emphasis on Brown’s popularity in contrast to Carmichael in the *Human Events* article was similar to other sources that stressed the popularity and admiration for Black cultural icons over “militants” such as Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver. See Louis Harris & Associates Inc., 1975.

can be seen as an opportunity and, as Weems (2009) illustrates, it is plausible that Nixon's promotion of Black economic development under the guise of "Black Power" and his attempts to gain support from Black militant leaders may have been indirectly influenced by King's assassination, with his death providing a window of opportunity to attract a Black constituency and mediate Black Power activism (pp. 113–114).

In some ways Nixon's plan was inspired, as the increased radicalization and growth of Black nationalist sentiment organizations such as CORE and SNCC had proved financially disastrous by frightening off White benefactors, who were a dominant source of income.¹⁹ If Nixon's "Bridges to Human Dignity" speeches had dangled a carrot for acceptable Black militancy, then some took the bait, with Floyd McKissick and Roy Innis both offering their support following Nixon's address (Weems, 2009, p. 115). Carmichael was fiercely critical of such figures, labeling them "Black Power pimps" (Stokely addresses, 1968). While Brown argued that his Black Power rhetoric was a bold move that cost him much of his crossover audience, it actually appeared to have increased his popularity. In August 1968, the singer released one of his most iconic songs, "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." While the revolutionary potential of his anthem was debatable, its appeal was undeniable, with the single holding the top spot on the R&B singles chart for over a month and climbing into the echelons of the Billboard Hot 100 (Whitburn, 2004, p. 84). Brown's soul business, fueled by his distinctive brand of Black Power, became a trust in which "millions of Black Americans... invested" (Ziegler, 2008, p. 45).

The idea of Brown as a social commentator was greeted with incredulity in some corners and implicitly seen to reflect a lack of leadership within the Black community. Goldman (2008)

¹⁹ In the case of CORE, as late as the mid-sixties, 95% of the organization's funding came from liberal Whites. Unsurprisingly, nationalist rhetorical excesses, some of which were worryingly anti-Semitic in nature, had formidable financial consequences. See Cook, 1998, p. 204; Lasky, 1966.

suggested that, “to whites, James is still an off-beat grunt, a scream at the end of the dial. To blacks, he’s *boss*” (p. 39). More tellingly, Stephen Lerner (1968) described the Boston concert as a stunning demonstration of how a singer such as Brown could be manipulated for political ends, and compared Brown’s involvement to the Peter Watkins (1967) film *Privilege*, in which British politics are dictated by a “charismatic rock singer whom the state exploits through mass media”. Carmichael measured criticism of Brown’s effectiveness against his personal admiration for the singer, arguing that “during the riot... the only black that whites could get to tell people to ‘keep cool’ was James Brown. But there was even a little violence at his concert. That way we don’t insult the Brother, but just bring him home gently” (Stokely addresses, 1968).

In contrast to the Brown’s increasingly positive and prominent portrayal in the media, Carmichael faced a major backlash for his apparently central role in the escalation of rioting and violence following King’s death. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had made Carmichael a primary target for surveillance by the organization’s counter intelligence program (COINTELPRO) as part of its “Black Hate” campaign in the aftermath of urban unrest in 1967 and, by the spring of 1968, the counterintelligence operation against “black nationalist organizations,” including SNCC, CORE, and the Panthers, was in full swing (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002, pp. 107–108). King’s assassination, the widespread rioting, and the overwhelmingly negative image of Carmichael presented in the media justified an escalation of FBI operations against the former SNCC leader (Weiner, 2012, pp. 269–272). The FBI placed Carmichael under investigation for his role in the riots and closely followed his movements (Evans & Novak, 1968e; Payne 1968b; U.S. probing Carmichael’s role, 1968). Hoover cited the “inflammatory urgings of such agitators as Stokely Carmichael” in justifying an \$11 million budget increase for the FBI following King’s death (Hoover finds peril, 1968). COINTELPRO stepped up its attempts to foster a split between

the Panthers and SNCC by moving to apply a “bad jacket” to Carmichael through painting him as an agency informant and operative. Federal operatives also “assisted” the Panthers in alienating Carmichael by forging letters on party letterhead intimating Carmichael’s FBI connections (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002, p. 126). Demonized in the press, and increasingly alienated from the Panthers and other Black Power activists, Carmichael retreated into exile in Guinea by the end of 1968, before officially renouncing his connections to the Panthers the following year (Anderson, 1968; Carmichael’s resignation, 1969; Fraser, 1969; Maynard, 1969).

Back in the United States, Brown seemed ready to embrace his new-found leadership role and would continue to emphasize that he was “totally committed to black power, the kind that is achieved not through the muzzle of a rifle but through education and economic leverage” (Brown & Tucker, 1987, p. 189; James Brown tells how, 1969). As an entertainer who often fought accusations of style over substance, it is somewhat ironic that Brown was drawn to Nixon through the President’s eye-catching claims, such as establishing a national holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., yet neglected to see the less showy but more substantial attacks on welfare and Great Society programs.²⁰ Brown’s support of Nixon was based on his supposed advocacy of Black Power through his “Black capitalism” initiatives, a stance Nixon largely failed to substantiate (Weems & Randolph, 2001, p. 59). Nor did Brown entertain the idea that Nixon might have championed “Black capitalism” in an attempt to divide and undermine Black Power as a political force (Kotlowski, 1998, p. 413). The entertainer wholeheartedly endorsed “Black capitalism” as a means to rejuvenate Black communities, without ever giving consideration to the viability of such an approach for less affluent Blacks. As a result, White

²⁰ For reaction to Brown’s support for Nixon and the singer’s response, see Brown says Nixon, 1972; Hall, 1973; Has James Brown, 1972; Not all U.S. Blacks, 1972; Sullivan, 2009, p. 190; Viorst, 1970; White, 1977.

political leaders and mainstream media outlets can be seen to have utilized Brown as a method of control or containment for Black protest.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that, in the aftermath of King's death, Brown and Carmichael were presented as oppositional forces that embodied "good" and "bad" forms of Black Power activism. When read within the context of the National Advisory Commission's publication of its report on Civil Disorders in the spring of 1968, Richard Nixon's "Bridges to Human Dignity" campaign speeches delivered several weeks after King's death, and ongoing covert federal operations against numerous Black Power activists and organizations, the depiction of Brown and Carmichael by American media outlets following King's assassination can be understood as part of broader attempts to mediate the Black Power concept and to create "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of Black Power protest and activism.

The convergence of Brown and Carmichael on the capital in the aftermath of King's death provided the opportunity for major media outlets to present different "forms" of Black Power activism that worked to negate its potential as a common and unifying concept, while at the same time promoting an "acceptable" form of Black Power in the shape of Brown's entrepreneurial racial advancement to exaggerate Carmichael's Black Power rhetoric and conflate it with an overtly negative, violent, and reductionist depiction of radical protest. Media outlets can be seen to have exaggerated Carmichael's role as a riot instigator in order to attack the image of Black Power he represented. Furthermore, while Brown was undoubtedly an important figure in the Black Power Movement, his celebration as a Black Power spokesman by

many of the same media outlets is deeply problematic and can be seen as an attempt to frame Black Power in a depoliticized way.

Significantly, Brown's notion of Black Power remained static and therefore predictable throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s, in contrast to Carmichael's evolving Black Power ideology.²¹ With his reiteration of Black Power as a form of racial uplift and ethnic entrepreneurship, Brown's bootstraps rhetoric fitted neatly into Nixon's "Black capitalism" initiative and emerging neoconservative articulations of race (Payne, 1968a). Brown's support of Nixon and his advice not to "quit the boat in the middle of the stream" illustrated his failure to recognize that he was one of the few Blacks who had made it onto the boat in the first place (Brown says Nixon, 1972; Norman, 2006). Neoconservative policies are often based on the assumption that "the elimination of formalistic racism means that blacks who did not have boots—much less bootstraps—during formal segregation had now been given them, and thus, should be prepared to pull themselves up" (Metzler, 2008, p. 105). Carmichael had voiced his concerns over the potential for White political co-optation of Black Power for some time. Speaking at a Black Power conference at the University of California in 1966, he questioned whether incumbent Governor Pat Brown or his challenger Ronald Reagan stood to benefit from the conference through the promotion of a distorted and overly violent notion of Black Power to bolster White votes (Lucas, 1966).

In describing Carmichael's role in the riots following King's death, many outlets were quick to contrast the image of Brown against an erratic and volatile Carmichael, which was closely connected to a particular "form" of Black Power that was irrational, reactionary, anti-White, and anti-American. In the aftermath of the riots, Whitney Young would criticize coverage

²¹ Carmichael progressed from viewing Black Power as the need to win a position of black strength within the United States to an explicitly Pan-African, anti-American, anti-imperialist stance. See Brown, 2009, p. 127; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 44; Draper, 1970, p. 123; Stewart, 1997, pp. 431–440.

of Carmichael and accuse the media of overemphasizing the Black Power threat, suggesting that Carmichael's following "amounts to about 50 Negroes and about 5,000 white reporters." Young complained that "they have created him... they have projected him.... When Stokely talks about 'killing whitey' his whole speech is reprinted and gets television coverage" (Negro leader says, 1968).

The media portrayal of Carmichael's role in the riots certainly played into images of Black Power as a destructive and explicitly violent concept, and provided justification for his increasing ostracization both in the media and by federal operatives. By contrast, the emphasis on Brown as a supporting figure to the containment strategies of Mayor Kevin White in Boston and Walter Washington in the capital was connected to a particular conception of Black Power as a form of Black advancement that was both manageable and controllable, while at the same time slotting seamlessly into the framework of an advanced capitalist society. In doing so, figures such as Brown could be held up as legitimate exponents of Black pride or Black Power activism while at the same time reaffirming a conservative economic agenda and helping to promote and legislate for "acceptable" forms of Black Power protest and activism.

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