

ABSTRACT

MCGEORGE, HEATHER RENEE. Two Dead in Mississippi: Black Power, Vietnam, Memory, and the 1970 Jackson State Shootings. (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron).

This thesis explores the 1970 shootings at Jackson State College in Mississippi to illuminate the intersections between American foreign policy, the Black Power Movement, and significant silences in the nation's collective memory. The Jackson State shootings, in which two black students died, followed just ten days after shootings at Kent State University killed four white students in Ohio. This study demonstrates that African American students at Jackson State, like white students at Kent, objected to Nixon's escalation of the war in Southeast Asia in the spring of 1970; however, they framed their arguments using the racially-charged rhetoric that was a defining feature of the Black Power Movement. Where Kent students protested a misguided crusade against communism, the students in Jackson asserted that Vietnam constituted yet another example of white America's racist desire to dominate the colored races the world over. This work also provides an in-depth examination of media coverage of the Jackson State shootings and finds that it depicted the event as secondary to events in Ohio. Understanding the ways in which Kent State has become the country's iconic shared reference point for Vietnam Era protest, while the shootings in Jackson have slipped into historical oblivion, challenges traditional mainstream narratives of the Civil Rights Movement that claim its goals had been achieved following the passage of federal legislation. Recovering the role of Black Power at Jackson State, moreover, helps to explain its absence from the nation's collective memory. Linking race, memory, and power sheds light on the racially based discrimination that has persisted in the wake of this defining moment of the freedom struggle.

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Two Dead in Mississippi: Black Power, Vietnam, Memory,
and the 1970 Jackson State Shootings

by
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DEDICATION

For Green and Gibbs. May your memories live on through this work.

BIOGRAPHY

Heather McGeorge was born and raised in west-central Ohio. In 2007 she received a Bachelor of Science degree majoring in Secondary Social Studies Education from Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Upon graduating from North Carolina State University in May 2012 with a Master of Arts degree, majoring in History, she is moving to San Diego, California where she plans to pursue a career as an educator.

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INTRODUCTION

Forgetting Jackson State

On a warm night in early May, a group of African American college students gather in front of a college dormitory in the South to protest what they view as the racial bias inherent in the promises of American democracy. White police arrive on the scene to maintain law and order. The tension between the black students and white police officers is so palpable you can feel it in the air. Between the students and police officers exists a no-man's land that no one on either side dare cross. Rocks and bottles hurled by the protesters crash against the pavement. Students jeer the police with taunts of "White pigs!," "Motherfuckers!," "White sons-of-bitches!," and "Pigs go home!"¹ Finally, the situation reaches a boiling point and the police begin shooting. In a matter of seconds, screams replace the sounds of gun-fire as students reappear from their refuge to assess what has just occurred. Two students lie lifeless on the pavement, shot dead by those supposedly responsible for protecting and serving the public. Many more are injured and in shock.

These students, much like those during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, endeavored to highlight the contradictions between America's egalitarian rhetoric and its anti-democratic practices. Yet, as their unrestrained actions illustrate, this was no longer the civil disobedience of the early 1960s. These events transpired May 14, 1970 at Jackson State College, an African American college in Mississippi. Following President Nixon's announcement that the United States planned to invade Cambodia as part of the war in

¹ Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), 70-71.

Vietnam and the killing of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970, students at Jackson State decided that they, too, needed to express their discontent. They had begun organizing protests on May 8, the Friday following the Ohio shootings, targeting both the invasion of yet another Southeast Asian country and the killing of their fellow college students in Ohio.²

America's foreign policy, and its detrimental impact on the home front, prompted Jackson State students—like those at Kent State—to take to the streets in protest; however, unlike those at Kent State, they framed their arguments in racialized terms. Henry Thompson, a Jackson State student who had organized a May 9 rally at the Governor's mansion, summed it up, stating: "They were sending black soldiers over there to fight people we didn't know a damned thing about. I wanted to bring to people's attention that we were fighting people that never called us 'niggers' before....The kids at Kent State had become second-class niggers, so they had to go. Anytime you go against the system, you become a nigger, regardless of your color."³ Young African American Mississippians had reason to be concerned about the government's course of action in Southeast Asia. Evidence suggests that Mississippi's all-white draft boards were intentionally drafting African Americans to serve in Vietnam in disproportionate numbers to whites.⁴ Furthermore, as Thompson's quote indicates, African Americans did not fail to highlight the irony of the national outrage provoked as a result of the shootings in Ohio. Despite the killing of countless African Americans at the hands of law enforcement during the Civil Rights Movement, it took the killing of white Americans for the

² *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 416.

³ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

⁴ James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 24-25, 28.

nation to finally stand up and take notice.⁵ Instances of police brutality have historically sent the message that black life is less valuable than white life, but by protesting the status quo the white students at Kent broke the social contract, thereby making themselves second-class citizens.

Following the May 8 protest, as tensions continued to rise on Jackson State's campus, the involvement of law enforcement simply moved the situation from bad to worse. Students resented the presence of white police officers on their campus. Lynch Street, the main thoroughfare of campus, became a battleground. On the evening of Wednesday May 13, students gathered outside of the campus buildings along Lynch Street and began displaying their frustrations by lobbing rocks and bottles at passing white motorists. Students' pent up anger bubbled to the surface and they expressed it freely. Jackson State student government president Warner Buxton stated, "They [black Jackson State students] had no bone to pick with Vietnam. They knew that Nixon was a shitass, Agnew was a shitass, and the governor, John Bell Williams, was a shitass. They knew that the political system was designed to keep black folk down. But that was a realization that most black people were born with."⁶ Jackson City Police arrived and set up a roadblock, essentially stopping the flow of traffic down Lynch Street. However, the unrest continued as a small group of students attempted to firebomb the college's Reserve Officers' Training Corps facilities. "It's a lot of things," claimed one student protester, interviewed while standing at the roadblock. "The war, Cambodia, the draft, the governor, Mississippi. It's not just any one thing."⁷ Mississippi

⁵ "Whites React to Kent Killings; Blacks Ignored," *Jet*, May 21, 1970.

⁶ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 35.

⁷ Ed Williams, "Jackson State College," in *Augusta, Georgia and Jackson State University: Southern Episodes in a National Tragedy*, ed. Southern Regional Council (Southern Regional Council, 1970), 46.

Governor John Bell Williams contacted the State Highway Patrol and asked them to assist the Jackson City Police in restoring the peace. Despite a few isolated skirmishes, the night's turmoil ended as quickly as it had started.⁸

The unrest continued the next evening on May 14, and as with Kent State, turned tragic. Once again the students took to Lynch Street, heckling passing drivers. Meanwhile a group of protesters drove a dump truck, which they had stolen from a campus construction site, into the middle of Lynch and set it afire. The combined force of the Jackson City Police and the Mississippi State Highway Patrol, mobilized by Governor Williams the night before, once again arrived on campus to calm the student uprising. After extinguishing the burning dump truck the police force moved down Lynch Street, ordering all students to return to their dormitories. When the police approached Alexander Hall, a women's dormitory, a group of over one hundred angry coeds met them. Students vented their frustration by throwing rocks and other random objects at the officers. Accounts of what triggered the barrage of gunfire vary, but it is clear that at approximately midnight the officers stationed in front of Alexander Hall opened fire on the building. A mere twenty-five seconds and over 200 rounds of ammunition later, fourteen individuals lay wounded, two fatally.

The officers on the scene argued that sniper fire coming from one of the windows in Alexander Hall prompted them to shoot, killing Phillip Gibbs and James Green. Yet students claimed that it was not sniper fire, but rather the crashing of a thrown bottle that spooked the officers.⁹ Despite several officers' claims that they opened fire in self-defense, diagrams created as part of the subsequent investigation indicate that the barrage was not concentrated

⁸ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 33-52.

⁹ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 53-79; and "The Shootings at Jackson State University: Thirty Years Later," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 28 (Summer 2000): 42.

on any one area, with some shots focused on all five floors of the west wing of Alexander Hall; others focused on the first floor lobby located in the center portion of the building; and still others directly targeted the protesters.¹⁰ Witnesses reported that the officers cared so little for the lives of the black students that they took time to collect their spent cartridges from the road before checking on the injured.¹¹

While the shootings at Kent State that precipitated the protests in Jackson have enjoyed considerable scholarly attention, scholarship that examines the Jackson State shootings remains sparse. In those studies that have been conducted, scholars have an inclination to overgeneralize the protests at Jackson State, wanting to explain them as *either* a reaction to the poor state of race relations in Mississippi *or* part of a larger student protest movement gaining momentum in the late 1960s. For example, the 1972 book *No Heroes, No Villains*, which resulted from an investigation commissioned by the American Association of University Professors, attempts to emphasize the similarities between Kent State and Jackson State as a means to explain why violence erupted on these particular college campuses. Law professor Robert O'Neil and his associates who conducted the study reacted to the President's Commission on Campus Unrest's explanation of "racial animosity" by claiming that "The killing of two students at Jackson was a most unusual event. Although blacks have been fatally wounded on college campuses before...such events do not occur with sufficient frequency to attribute the deaths to pervasive racial animosity...to explain Jackson in this way says nothing about the parallel occurrence at Kent, where race was not a factor." Instead the authors assert that "two themes may explain both confrontations. One was student

¹⁰ *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 432-434.

¹¹ Theophilus Green, "What's Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss," *Jet*, June 4, 1970.

resentment over public policy toward the campus...the other issue was an abiding bitterness between students and law enforcement agencies.”¹² While these two conclusions may hold a grain of truth, O’Neil and his associates miss more than they explain by ignoring the vital role that race and American foreign policy played in the unrest.

Journalist Tim Spofford’s 1988 *Lynch Street* offers a more extensive presentation of the events in Jackson. Spofford highlights the informative over the analytical, and while he does attempt to situate the shootings within their historical context, he deemphasizes anti-war sentiment in the state and highlights the individual racism that “afflicted” Mississippians. He writes, “In ultraconservative Mississippi there were few militants to protests the Vietnam War... They [Jackson State students] knew their state suffered only the most virulent strain of the same disease afflicting the rest of the nation: intolerance that winked at killing nonwhites.”¹³ Spofford makes no attempt to hypothesize about the shootings, but his decision to focus on the poor state of race relations in both Mississippi, and the nation at large, tells a particular story.

The President’s Commission, O’Neil, and Spofford all failed to make a vital connection when examining the shootings. The Jackson State students’ attempts to combat racism and their disagreement with the Vietnam War did not represent isolated concerns; they developed from the same ideological agenda. Therefore, the explanation of what precipitated the protests in Jackson does not appear to be *either* race *or* Vietnam, but rather *both*. Influenced by Black Power ideology, which became increasingly prominent in Mississippi in the mid-to-late 1960s, the students at Jackson State merged their loathing of

¹² Robert M. O’Neil, *No Heroes, No Villains: New Perspectives on Kent State and Jackson State* (London, UK: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1972), 1-2, 34.

¹³ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

white supremacy and the war, claiming that our country's subjugation of the Vietnamese constituted yet another example of white society's need to dominate the "colored" races on a global scale. Students' rhetoric and activities revealed this influence before, during, and after the protests. In *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, historian Joy Ann Williamson argues that "students, too, created on-campus [Black Power] movement centers to close the gap between democratic rhetoric and democratic reality," but because students focused on campus-based issues, attacking the vestiges of white supremacy in their immediate environment, historians often fail to connect these student-led movements on black college campuses to the larger Black Power Movement. As she contends, "That students focused most of their attention inward did not change the underlying purpose of their activism: increased power, self-determination, and autonomy."¹⁴ Making this link would have allowed scholars of the Jackson State shootings to simultaneously locate this event within a local, national, and international context and a long history of student activism.

However, these scholars should not shoulder all the blame for prevalent misinterpretations of the Jackson State shootings. Historians of the Civil Rights Movement have also excluded the Jackson State shootings from histories recounting violence against activists in Mississippi, despite the protesters' goal of combating white supremacy. Jackson State demonstrates the limitations of "traditional narratives" of the Civil Rights Movement. Typically, such narratives focus on the movement's "classical" phase, which spans from the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and promote the idea that the African American struggle for equal rights

¹⁴ Joy Ann Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower: Black Colleges and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 131-132, 134-136.

had achieved its goals with the enactment of federal legislation. As labeled by Glenn Eskew, this “Won Cause” narrative “represents the Movement as a story of sweeping cultural and political triumph.”¹⁵ Thus, any lack of a clear cut victory falls outside the purview of the Civil Rights Movement. In accordance with this limited chronology and equally narrow definition of “success,” historians have portrayed events which come after this triumph, such as the advent Black Power, as a period of declension.

The genesis of this interpretation actually resides in media coverage generated at the time. In “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues that events that occurred after the passage of the federal legislation are not included in traditional narratives because

the national press's overwhelmingly sympathetic, if misleading, coverage changed abruptly in the mid-1960s with the advent of black power and black uprisings in the urban North. Training a hostile eye on those developments, the cameras turned away from the South, ignoring the southern campaign's evolving goals, obscuring interregional connections and similarities, and creating a narrative breach between what people think of as "the movement" and the ongoing popular struggles the late 1960s and the 1970s.¹⁶

Nikhil Singh offers a similar explanation in *Black is a Country*, stating, “At this point a series of sudden, coincidental shifts are said to have occurred: from civil rights to black power; south to north; nonviolent to violent; tolerant to divisive; integrationist to black nationalist; patriotic to anti-American, all conspiring to fracture the movement, undermine political support, and create widespread public backlash against what were now seen as excessive

¹⁵ Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, distributed by the University of Georgia Press, 2008), 28.

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (Mar 2005): 1236, 1254.

black demands.” Therefore, when discussions of Black Power have appeared within larger historical studies concerning the Civil Right Movement historians tend to focus on the dichotomy between nonviolence and Black Power, emphasizing the highly-publicized embrace of armed self-reliance and Black Power’s undermining of the traditional movement’s accomplishments. This damaging illustration “both legitimized the withdrawal of public commitment to laws and social policies designed to promote racial equality and helped to renew an ago-old racist imagination,” according to Singh.¹⁷

Both *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* by Charles Payne and *Local People* by John Dittmer, considered the most comprehensive works on the freedom struggle in Mississippi, neglect to mention the shooting of black students at Jackson State in 1970.¹⁸ The reason is that both scholars frame Black Power as declension. In his work, for example, Payne maintains that Black Power had “more interest in the dramatic gesture than in building at the base, and little concern with building interpersonal relationships that reflected their larger values. The basic metaphor of solidarity became ‘nation’ not ‘family’... [and] movement activists increasingly lost the ability to relate to one another in human terms.”¹⁹ According to Payne, the strength of Mississippi’s freedom struggle depended on its community organizing tradition. Themes of the organizing tradition included, “an emphasis on building relationships, respect for collective leadership, for bottom-up change, the expansive sense of how democracy ought to operate in everyday life, the emphasis on building for the long haul,

¹⁷ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁸ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 365.

the anti-bureaucratic ethos, [and] the preference for addressing local issues.” For Payne, the organizing tradition’s ultimate value rested in its ability to empower ordinary people to work at the local level to improve their own lives. Thus, when the movement in Mississippi supposedly lost its community organizing tradition, due to the inhospitality and nationalism of the encroaching Black Power Movement, it lost part of what made it unique and valuable.²⁰

While Payne clearly blames Black Power for the decline of the organizing tradition in Mississippi, Dittmer points to the growing indifference of white America and the abandonment of the Mississippi movement by civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as the reasons for the deterioration of the local movement for political representation. Dittmer, however, closely ties these developments to the progression of Black Power. He claims that Black Power not only led SNCC to neglect its grassroots work, but it also angered white America to the point of becoming “unmoved by events in Mississippi.”²¹ Therefore, the historical analyses of Black Power within these larger studies of the Civil Rights Movement portray it in an overwhelmingly negative light.

Historical production is a contentious process, according to historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, often causing a breach between “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened.” Although multiple perspectives on history exist within a given society, those with power produce the version that reproduces their supremacy. Trouillot claims the powerful achieve this silencing and distortion through the unequal creation and assembly of sources that will then be used to make narratives and histories. Therefore, “professional historians

²⁰ Ibid., 1-4, 364.

²¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 403-409.

alone do not set the narrative framework into which their stories fit. Most often, someone else had already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences.”²² This applies especially to narratives of Black Power. In his work, for example, William Van Deburg argues that “Since the initial expression of Black Power sentiment received immediate but shallow and disjointed coverage from the major news sources, popular understanding of the movement was distorted. Black Power was trivialized. Its characteristic diversity of expression was interpreted as chaos and disorganization...[and] Ideological distinctives were obscured in the glare of the camera’s light.” According to Van Deburg this early “misperception and manipulation of the Black Power message” unfortunately led to lasting misconceptions, including that the movement was an “aberrant, directionless expression of rage...incapable of making lasting contributions to black life.”²³ Historians of the Civil Rights Movement did not intentionally silence and distort Black Power, though some have relied too much on narratives established by those in power at the time, especially those with controlling stake in the media. More broadly, those with the authority and means to shape the production process attempted to misrepresent Black Power, because recognizing its salience would also mean acknowledging that the Civil Rights Movement did not provide white America with moral clarity; inequality persisted in its wake.

According to historian Joseph Crespino, much of this continued inequality can be credited to the masterful political maneuvering of Mississippi’s white leaders. Americans imagined Mississippi as “another country,” wholly backward and un-American due to the

²² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2, 23-28.

²³ William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 13, 15.

state's racist fervor during the classical phase of the movement. However, Crespino claims that after the passage of civil rights legislations, Mississippi's overt racism in the political arena gave way to a more furtive and equally damaging discrimination. He writes,

...despite segregationist popular pledges that they would never submit to racial integration, white leaders in the state initiated a subtle and strategic accommodation to the demands of civil rights activists and the federal government, one that helped preserve the proprieties of white elites and that put white Mississippians in a position to contribute to a broad conservative countermovement against the liberal triumphs of the 1960s.²⁴

Through this strategy of outward compliance Mississippians guaranteed the continued dominance of whites and prevented meaningful change that would have guaranteed justice for African Americans. Behind the scenes, the whims of the white elite in Mississippi remained supreme.

Therefore, to begin explaining why the Jackson State shootings are viewed as separate from, rather than as an extension of, student activism in Mississippi one must ask: what was it about the political and social climate with regard to race in Mississippi that caused Jackson State students to turn to the Black Power Movement as a means to redress their grievances? Those activists calling for Black Power were dealing with the same issues confronted by activists in the early 1960s. Evidence suggests that despite efforts to "crack" Mississippi during the traditional phase of the Civil Rights Movement, the state in 1970 retained the white supremacist virulence that had contributed to the initial explosion of civil rights activity during the early 1960s. Moreover, issues of race continued to dominate the

²⁴ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

political culture of the late 1960s, at the state and local level, with efforts to subvert the civil rights of African Americans continuing, despite federal civil rights legislation. Social relations between white and blacks did not fare much better, with race-hate groups enjoying renewed vigor. Whites continued engaging in a backlash against civil rights activity and violence often characterized interactions between whites and blacks. Black Power, like the civil disobedience of the classical phase of the civil rights era, emerged as a response to these conditions.

Black Power historians have undertaken the task of rescuing this watershed period of American history from historical misunderstanding. As Tim Tyson asserts, “‘the civil rights movement’ and ‘the Black Power movement’ emerged from the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom.”²⁵ Prior to Tyson’s ground-breaking case-study concerning Robert Williams and Black Power in Monroe, North Carolina, scholarship about Black Power tended to focus on the movement’s northern roots. However, Tyson foregrounds its southern roots while also demonstrating Black Power’s salience in an earlier era, namely the post-World War II years. Responding to Tyson’s work, historians have enthusiastically undertaken the task of thoroughly analyzing Black Power as an intellectually and culturally-based movement that transcended regional borders and have begun to reframe its chronology.

Singh also adheres to a “long movement” chronology, positioning the birth of the civil rights struggle at the intersection of conditions created by the post-World War I black migration, the Keynesian economics of the New Deal, and the increased globalism inherent

²⁵ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3.

in World War II. However, rather than focusing on the movement's regional developments, Singh argues that "the black struggle for 'civil rights' in the United States was only a small part of a much longer, more global, and mostly unfulfilled struggle against the psychic, material, and juridical legacies of white supremacy." Dismissing Black Nationalist strains of thought within the movement, in favor of the color-blind rhetoric of "civil rights," allowed American liberal intellectuals to make strategic concessions that left the struggle for "real" democracy unfinished. According to Singh, Black Power activists and organization, such as the Black Panthers, continued this nationalist tradition with full recognition that liberal integrationism remained insufficient to solve America's racial problems and address its structural economic inequality. He claims, "The most far-reaching theoreticians of black power understood that the symbolic equality enshrined in citizenship would provide little genuine sustenance for working-class racial migrants and do little to counteract the ravages of racial capitalism that had systemically underdeveloped black America."²⁶

Peniel Joseph's narrative history of the Black Power Movement, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, has provided unprecedented insight into the genealogy and intellectual foundation of Black Power. Joseph builds upon Tyson's contention that the Black Power Movement developed simultaneously with the Civil Rights Movement and echoes Singh's assertion that the civil rights struggle and Black Power were part of a larger global struggle against white supremacy. While Stokely Carmichael's 1966 call for "Black Power!" became a highly-publicized aspect of the Meredith March, ushering in what many saw as the beginning of a new phase in the African American quest for equality, Joseph asserts that

²⁶ Singh, *Black is a Country*, 1-9, 43, 46, 221.

activists, such as Malcolm X, “had embodied the phrase, even before its widespread use.”

Joseph also demonstrates that Black Power was not simply an outgrowth of the frustration felt by the African American community in the mid-late 1960s, but rather had its roots in a uniquely African American cultural and intellectual identity, going as far back as the Black Nationalism and Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.²⁷

Actually, Joseph expands the work done by Tyson, both chronologically and geographically. Where Tyson locates Black Power in World War II, Joseph follows its deep ancestry back to “Garveyism” and the “New Negro nationalism of the post-World War I era.”²⁸ For Joseph, the definition of Black Power in the 1950s and 1960s hinges on a Black Nationalist continuity. Geographically, Joseph illustrates variations of Black Power developing concurrently in the post-World War II period in both the North and South. While Black Power ideology in the South coalesced primarily for practical reasons, such as when Robert Williams used the idea of armed self-reliance to repel the Ku Klux Klan in Monroe in 1957, the movement in northern cities, primarily New York, developed in conjunction with and was disseminated by African American forms of popular culture. Positioning the Harlem Renaissance as a forerunner, Joseph states that, “Deploying black art as a vehicle for political expression was not new,” once again stretching the traditional timeline of the Black Power Movement.²⁹

Waiting Til the Midnight Hour remains the most complete synthesis of Black Power to date; however, Joseph’s narrative contains gaps. For example, his top-down approach to

²⁷ Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2006), 147, 1-5.

²⁸ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 26-48; and Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 2, 16.

²⁹ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 20-21, 118-123, 119.

the history of Black Power means that the contributions made to the movement by traditionally less visible historical actors remain overlooked. In the same vein, Joseph's choice to focus on the "great men" in the movement, such as Malcolm X, obscures the tangible gains made by activists at the grassroots level.

Hassan Kwame Jeffries's *Bloody Lowndes* offers a corrective to Joseph by merging the desire to locate the origins of Black Power with an emphasis on the contributions of grassroots activists. Jeffries recounts the freedom struggle in Lowndes County, Alabama, primarily the establishment of the Lowndes Country Freedom Organization (LCFO), "an all-black, independent political party," which "transformed Lowndes County from an unheard bastion of white supremacy to the center of southern black militancy." Although this transformation appeared unexpected, Jeffries asserts that "it was actually more than a century in the making." Immediately after Emancipation, African Americans in Lowndes County had begun laying the groundwork for the broad-based movement that would not come to fruition until the mid-1960s. In further lengthening the timeline of the movement, Jeffries makes a vital distinction; rather than framing his study through the conventional notion of civil rights, his model "revolves around the concept of freedom rights—the assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom." Much like Singh, by redefining the goals of the movement, Jeffries reveals the shortcomings of the concept of "civil rights" and shows ordinary people's understanding of the limitations of citizenship when framed so narrowly. According to Jeffries, African Americans identified freedom rights at the moment of emancipation and connected those to rights denied to them under the system of slavery. Freedom rights included not only, "freedom of speech, religion,

and assembly and the right to due process, keep and bear arms, and vote,” but also natural rights, such as “right to own property, choose employment, enjoy economic security, marry and start a family, move without restriction, and receive an education.” By offering a broader interpretation of the movement’s goals, Jeffries, “complicates the movement’s standard chronology,” and “allows for regional and temporal differentiation, moments of ideological radicalization, and periods of social movement formation,” thereby uniting supposedly dissimilar strains of the movement under a common umbrella.³⁰

Whereas Joseph extends the timeline of Black Power by promoting a distinct definition that includes mass movement and uniquely African American cultural developments, Jeffries widens the range by redefining the ultimate goal of African American activism. Moreover, Jeffries’s focus on the local level allows him to highlight the “special character of grassroots insurgency,” and show how grassroots activists created a “remarkable experiment in democracy,” through the LCFO. Jeffries’s work shows that Black Power activists viewed the attainment of political power at the local level as fundamental to their ideology, countering Payne’s contention that Black Power had no interest in “building at the base.”³¹

Collectively expanding the earlier work done by Black Power historians such as Van Deburg, this more recent scholarship unearths the deep roots of Black Power. In doing so historians confirm that Black Power, not the nonviolence of the Civil Rights Movement, represents a more accurate reflection of the continuities within the organizing tradition.

Although African Americans publicly eschewed expressing sentiments related to Black

³⁰ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-6, 8.

³¹ Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 1-6, 192; and Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 365.

Power in favor of nonviolent direct action during the classical phase of the movement, Black Power ideology took center stage in the mid-to-late 1960s, and “energized and educated black Americans,” due to young people’s frustration with the slow pace of change.³²

An examination of the protests at Jackson State will reveal a similar conclusion: the Black Power advocated by the students in Jackson did not spring out of the ground spontaneously, but emerged as part of a longer tradition in Mississippi aimed at alleviating the continued subordination of everyday African Americans. Nevertheless, for the students, it sparked a revolution. Throughout the melee at Jackson State, they shunned the seeming cautiousness of their parents and engaged in open rebellion against the symbols of domination in their immediate environment. Their actions deserve our full attention. However, due to their connection with Black Power, the Jackson State shootings have slipped into oblivion, neglected by scholars and forgotten by many of the Americans who lived through this tumultuous period in the nation’s history.

This work endeavors to rescue them. It will do so by illustrating that white Mississippians carried their long history of racism and white-on-black violence into the post-civil rights era, despite the traditional narrative’s claim that the Civil Rights Movement convinced white Americans of the errors of their racist ways. Frustration with ongoing prejudice in Mississippi and the lack of substantive change led to student activists’ public embrace of Black Power. Examining the protests at Jackson State, this work will also show that students influenced by the growing Black Power Movement made salient connections between the continued dominance of white Americans in their own country and the

³² Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 29-62, 306.

American government's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Lastly, it will investigate representations of the Jackson State shootings, created by federal authorities and the press, to explore the construction of narratives that attempted to explain what had happened. What these demonstrate is the power of political and cultural forces to shape the nation's collective memories. Connecting events at the state, national, and international level will allow us to see what is truly at stake in the forgetting of Jackson State.

CHAPTER 1

Jackson State: The Tragedy that Mississippi Built

...The white man has controlled by fear. When the white man can no longer control by fear or intimidation, he tends to resort to more devastating methods such as the atrocity at Jackson State. The recent event was done to reinforce fear in the black community, to let young blacks know who's in charge. This strategy is going to backfire. I think he somewhat underestimated the young black man.³³

Degecha X's analysis in 1970 exemplified a strong sentiment within the African American community, particularly among the youth. Despite the apparent triumphs of the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans continued to hold subordinate positions in society. White men, according to Degecha X, maintained their dominance as they always had, through a combination of intimidation and violence. Regardless of overtures from civil rights activists, white Americans appeared unwilling to relinquish their dominant position because that would require a fundamental restructuring of society. However, for a portion of the African American community, the time for negotiation with whites had passed. Black Power offered young black Americans an outlet for these feelings.

The modern Black Power Movement, which began gaining momentum in Mississippi during the mid-to-late 1960s, provided this turning away from the white community with a coherent agenda. As Tim Tyson asserts, Black Power shared a common history and objective with the Civil Rights Movement and "stressed black economic advancement, black pride,

³³ Williams, "Jackson State College," 68.

black culture, independent black political action, and...armed self-reliance.”³⁴ Certain aspects of the Black Power philosophy, such as the idea of armed self-reliance, were deeply ingrained in the African American community in Mississippi. For example, Mississippi activist L.C. Dorsey later testified that her father used to walk his children to the bus stop while carrying a shotgun.³⁵ However, during the early phase of the civil rights era, a difference existed between the public appearance of the movement and personal feelings at the grassroots level. As a public strategy, nonviolent direct action stressed that African Americans put forth a dignified and non-aggressive image to gain support from both white moderates and the federal government. Movement activists advocating nonviolence framed the movement as a “moral crusade.” According to Hasan Jeffries, nonviolence remained an alien concept at the local level. Lacking national media coverage, grassroots activists had no white audience to win over with the use of nonviolence; therefore, armed self-defense, which Jeffries calls the “default setting for African Americans,” prevailed. As increasing numbers of African Americans began to understand the gap between the movement’s political accomplishments and ongoing injustice, nonviolence as the foremost public, as well as tactical, strategy began to lose relevance.³⁶

Indeed, by the mid-1960s the nonviolent veneer of the movement began to fracture as African Americans realized that the “victories” they had achieved, such as the passage of federal civil rights legislation, did little to improve the everyday lives of African Americans. Stokely Carmichael, a leader in SNCC, gave voice to the new strategy, which would be

³⁴ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 3, 191.

³⁵ L.C. Dorsey, interview, *Freedom on My Mind*, VHS, produced/directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, written/edited by Michael Chandler (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1994).

³⁶ Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 56, 104, 116.

posited as an alternative to nonviolence by the white mainstream press. During a 1966 march across Mississippi, Carmichael delivered a series of impassioned speeches issuing a call for “Black Power,” and his audiences eagerly responded. This call and response marked the public advent of Black Power in Mississippi.³⁷

In 1967 Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton put pen to paper, propounding a philosophy of Black Power that Carmichael had developed as a result of his work in the Deep South. In the foreword to the aptly titled *Black Power*, they said, “This book presents a political framework and ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerilla warfare...if there is the slightest chance to avoid it, the politics of Black Power as described in this book is seen as the last viable hope.”³⁸ The Black Power philosophy articulated by Carmichael and Hamilton revolved around a handful of principles. First, they claimed that in order to achieve equality African Americans must “close ranks,” refusing to cater to the goals and values of white liberals. Such concern for solidarity extended beyond the nation’s borders. Black Power was particularly concerned for the struggles of the “colored” races across the globe, contributing to its staunch anti-colonialism. Advocates of Black Power closely followed developments in the African and Asian conflicts, such as the war in Vietnam, which they felt had been caused by the rampant imperialism of the white supremacist nations. Perhaps the linchpin in the Black Power philosophy, as was the case in the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement, was the need for black political strength. The road to gaining this strength meant

³⁷ *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement*, “The Time Has Come (1964-1966),” Volume 4, Episode 1, DVD, produced/written/directed by James A DeVinney and Madsion Davis Lacy, Jr., edited by Charles Scott (Blackside, Inc., 1990).

³⁸ Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), xi.

searching for new ways to challenge the racism inherent in America's political system and placing a considerable number of African Americans in decision-making positions. Lastly, and probably the most startling aspect of the Black Power philosophy to white liberals, was its abandonment of the strategy of nonviolence. Instead, proponents called upon blacks to defend themselves against threats from white supremacists. Carmichael and Hamilton wrote, "Those of us who advocate Black Power are quite clear in our own minds that a 'non-violent' approach to civil rights is an approach that black people cannot afford and a luxury white people do not deserve."³⁹

Degecha X, a figure in Jackson, Mississippi's Black Power Movement, echoed Carmichael's and Hamilton's sense of the dire situation facing African Americans. Despite a tendency to cloak his activities in mystery, Degecha X spoke with reporters during the turmoil at Jackson State in 1970, saying, "There's got to be a new youthful involvement here. The old pacifist Negro will have to take a back seat...his type of leadership has been in harmony with plans of the white power structure. The black community has continued to step off on the wrong foot on every take-off."⁴⁰ Degecha X had reason to be cautious. He was actually a Jackson State student, named Henry Thompson, who used the code name to conduct his civil rights activities, hoping to thwart the invasive techniques of Mississippi's investigative agency, the State Sovereignty Commission.⁴¹ Thompson's rhetoric indicates that the politics of Black Power had gained credence among at least some student protesters

³⁹ Ibid., 34-44, 53.

⁴⁰ Williams, "Jackson State College," 68.

⁴¹ "Thompson, Henry Isiah," file, Sovereignty Commission Online, Mississippi Department of Archives and History Digital Collections, http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/imagelisting.php (accessed April 19, 2011). [Archive hereafter cited as MDAHDC]. As the Commission's file for Thompson shows, the agency was fully advised concerning both his alias and the work he engaged in while using it.

at Jackson State, influencing the way they reacted to the April 1970 invasion of Cambodia and the May 1970 shootings at Kent State.

What was it about the political and social climate with regard to race in Mississippi that caused Jackson State students to turn to the Black Power Movement as a means to redress their grievances? Tim Spofford has commented, “They [Jackson State students] knew their state suffered only the most virulent strain of the same disease afflicting the rest of the nation: intolerance that winked at killing nonwhites.”⁴² Civil rights activists had long recognized that although racism was a problem throughout the South, Mississippi constituted ground zero in a sense. If activists during the classical phase of the movement, typically defined as beginning in 1954 with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and concluding in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, could just “crack” Mississippi then the rest of the South would follow.⁴³ Unfortunately, despite efforts to loosen the stranglehold white supremacy had on Mississippi, the state was not a reformed version of its formerly racist self when the unrest on Jackson State’s campus began in 1970.

In the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, white Southerners engaged in open backlash against the movement for racial equality. White men, in particular, increasingly relied on violence and a racialized and gendered discourse to reaffirm their rule, echoing the political battles of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. For most white Southerners, Reconstruction constituted a world “turned bottomsides up.” According to Steven Hahn, newly freed African Americans mobilized at the grassroots level, resolutely entering the public and political arenas that had previously been the exclusive domain of

⁴² Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

⁴³ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1234.

whites.⁴⁴ Determined not to concede any of their power, white Southerners fiercely struggled to return to the pre-war status quo. Few states fought harder than Mississippi. In his groundbreaking 1935 work concerning this era, W.E.B. Dubois contended that “White Mississippi fought Reconstruction tenaciously at every step.” Passing “Black Codes” and refusing to ratify the Reconstruction amendments, white Mississippians also committed election fraud and intimidated black voters as a means of robbing African Americans of political power.⁴⁵ In addition to underhanded political maneuvering and intimidation, white Southerners engaged in personal attacks to thwart Reconstruction.

Historian Hannah Rosen demonstrates that during Reconstruction, when the exclusive citizenship claims of white men became threatened, they relied on a gendered discourse to justify their acts of violence against African Americans. Such acts also constituted a defense of white, Southern patriarchy.⁴⁶ According to Rosen, white southerners justified the exclusion of African Americans from politics and their segregation in public spaces by “describing the new black presence as socially, sexually, and politically dangerous.” Policing African Americans depended on and legitimated extralegal violence.⁴⁷ White vigilante organizations formed to protect white Southerners from supposed “negro domination,” such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), exemplified this merging of violence and gendered discourse. Referring to the KKK’s tactics, Rosen claims, “this politically targeted and instrumental violence was suffused with imagery of gender and sexuality...[which] raises questions about

⁴⁴ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2003), 216-264.

⁴⁵ W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1992), 435, 431-450.

⁴⁶ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 4-19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

understanding this violence as a mere instrument of force. It was also a complex rhetoric of power and a stage for the formation and contestation of racial and gender meanings, identities, and hierarchies.”⁴⁸ Moreover, due to the terrorist acts the KKK did perpetrate, often the mere threat of violence was enough to intimidate black Mississippians into submission. Klan members perfected their tactics over time, and despite periods of decline, the KKK had remained a constant presence in Southern life. Ironically, the continued presence of the KKK depended on the existence of African Americans unwilling to silently maintain their subordinate position in society.

As a result of the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Brown* case, which successfully culminated “twenty years of NAACP efforts” at ending school segregation, white Southerners once again portrayed African American equality as a threat to the “Southern way of life” and engaged in open repression against the black community.⁴⁹ Recruitment literature distributed by the Knights of the KKK, Realm of Mississippi, headquartered in Jackson, was emblazoned with the words “Never—Shall We Be Overcome!” Similarly, “A Message from the Invisible Empire,” attempted to motivate white Mississippians to take action against change, imploring

Your country is screaming for your help. It needs a blood and brain transfusion ... There is no time left to be a coward. There are no holes, bushes, fences, wives, children, businesses, jobs, or excuses left that you can hide behind... well take a good look at the black man and white woman all armed up... because that will be your daughter tomorrow... the truth always hurts, especially when it’s on you.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁹ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 34.

⁵⁰ “Recruitment Flyer,” Ku Klux Klan Records, 1960s-1970s, Collection #04921, Folder 2, UNCSHC.

Playing upon the pride of white men, the KKK used language intended to insult those white men whose opinions differed from theirs, and stirred fears that white Southerners harbored about race mixing. Yet violence Mississippi-style had always found its favorite victims among African Americans and white-on-black violence remained a harsh reality of everyday life. Those brave enough to challenge white supremacy did so at considerable risk.

In addition to the Klan, private citizens' groups, such as the White Citizens' Council (WCC), emerged after *Brown* to thwart civil rights activity through intimidation and economic retribution. As Charles Payne has observed, "by the 1950s white leadership thought it necessary to seek 'respectable' methods of defending white supremacy," and thus, "In Mississippi, one of the most important reactions to the decision was the formation, in October 1954, of the White Citizens' Council."⁵¹ While the first chapters of the WCC appeared in Mississippi, the organization quickly spread throughout the South. Printed in Jackson, *The Citizens' Council*, the official newspaper of the organization, used as its tagline: "Dedicated to the peace, good order and domestic tranquility in our Community and in our State and to the preservation of our States' Rights."⁵² This mission statement also epitomizes the gendered discourse highlighted by Rosen. As the WCC's language of "domestic tranquility" suggests, African American men and women still appeared to white supremacists as "incapable of sustaining respectable marriages and of fulfilling their responsibility to be law-abiding."⁵³ The perceived threat in the mid-20th century was what would happen to the white family if black and white children attended school together. Thus, the WCC, like its

⁵¹ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 34-35.

⁵² *The Citizens' Council*, Jackson, MS, Citizens' Councils Newspaper Historical Resource Website, <http://www.citizenscouncils.com/> (accessed April 23, 2011).

⁵³ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 7.

nineteenth century forebears, insinuated that only through the continued dominance of white men would “domestic tranquility” be maintained.

Dedicated to white supremacy, WCC members viewed themselves as a respectable organization, comprised of the state’s most wealthy and influential citizens. “Pursuing the agenda of the Klan with the demeanor of the Rotary,” Payne writes, the “Councils officially eschewed violence and other extralegal tactics, instead launching a wave of economic reprisals against anyone, black or white, seen as a threat to the status quo.”⁵⁴ This tactic of economic retribution against African Americans who stepped outside the bounds of traditional race relations appears evident in the tales of many civil rights activists. After working as a plantation time keeper for eighteen years, Fannie Lou Hamer’s employer fired her the same day she chose to register to vote. However, what the WCC’s did not count on was that their use of economic retribution often pushed African Americans further into the movement. Rather than languishing as a result of the economic setback, Hamer used the opportunity to devote all her time to organizing and speaking out in support of the Mississippi freedom struggle.⁵⁵ Hamer’s case was perhaps extraordinary; many African Americans could not recover from the economic marginalization they suffered at the hands of the WCC.

While upstanding “private” citizens founded the WCC, chapters in Mississippi had help in cementing their control over the state. The Sovereignty Commission, established by the state legislature in 1956 as an attempt to subvert the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown*

⁵⁴ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 35.

⁵⁵ *Freedom on My Mind*.

decision, remained active throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁶ Despite public claims that this government organization dealt strictly in public relations, the legislative act that created the commission claimed its purpose was “to resist the usurpation of the rights and powers reserved to this state and our sister states by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof” [and] To exercise this loosely defined objective, the commission was granted extensive investigative capabilities.” Ex-officio members of the Commission included high-ranking state officials, such as the governor, president of the Mississippi Senate, the state Attorney General, and the Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives.⁵⁷ The State Sovereignty Commission provided both moral and financial support to the WCC in Mississippi, aiding white citizens’ crusade against the freedom struggle by employing methods of surveillance as a means of controlling both the direction of the movement and the pace of change.

Student activists at Jackson State were well-versed in the techniques of the Commission. As early as 1961 the Commission had begun investigating the activities of those Jackson State students who appeared to support the Civil Right Movement in Mississippi. In an April 1, 1961 letter addressed to then director of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Albert Jones, President of Jackson State Jacob Reddix provided the information Jones had apparently requested concerning a handful of Jackson State students engaged in some type of protest activity that appeared of particular interest to the Commission. Reddix enclosed the names, class standing, and home addresses of these forty-

⁵⁶ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 3.

⁵⁷ Sarah Rowe-Sims, “The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: An Agency History,” *Mississippi History Now*, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/243/mississippi-sovereignty-commission-an-agency-history> (accessed April 24, 2011).

five Jackson State students with his letter.⁵⁸ Yet, as Joy Ann Williamson points out, black college administrators had very little leeway when dealing with the activism of their students. She states, “The all-white Board of Trustees of Institution of Higher Learning appointed public black college presidents less for their credentials than for their conservative and gradualist ideas on the pace and direction of the black freedom movement. The board expected full compliance...and threatened to fire them if they faltered in their mission to quash the movement.”⁵⁹ Moderation and fear of dismissal often placed these college administrators at odds with young black student activists on their campuses.

The alliance between the Commission and WCC appeared natural since government leaders often comprised the membership of WCC chapters. The Commission’s support of the WCC continued after the passage of federal civil rights legislation. Budget documents of the Commission confirm that of the \$96,000 budgeted for public relations between 1964 and 1966, they directed \$12,000 to the support of the WCC.⁶⁰ During a 1966 meeting of the Jackson Citizens’ Council both Ross Barnett, former Mississippi state governor, and James O. Eastland, a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, spoke. Barnett declared, “every local Citizens’ Council should...urge support of ‘the right kind of candidates.’”⁶¹ By “the right kind of candidates,” Barnett meant those who supported the continued superiority of the white community in Mississippi.

⁵⁸ Jacob L. Reddix to Albert Jones, letter, April 1, 1961, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed April 19, 2011).

⁵⁹ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 114.

⁶⁰ “Budget Update of Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, July 1 1964-October 29, 1965,” Taylor Branch Papers, Collection #05047, Box 106, Folder 764, The Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina’s Wilson Special Collections Library. [Collection hereafter cited as Branch Papers][Archive hereafter cited as UNCSHC].

⁶¹ Ross Barnett and James Eastland, Jackson Citizens’ Council Meeting, May 18, 1966, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Newsfilm Collection, Station WLBT, Jackson, MS, Item #3149, Reel F2200, Branch Papers, Box 104, Folder 748, UNCSHC.

Issues of race continued to dominate Mississippi's political culture throughout the decade. At both the state and local level, efforts to subvert the civil rights of African Americans continued despite the passage of federal civil rights legislation. According to Joseph Crespino, "white leaders in the state initiated a subtle and strategic accommodation to the demands of civil right activists and the federal government, one that helped preserve the priorities of white elites and that put white Mississippians in a position to contribute to a broad conservative countermovement against the liberal triumphs of the 1960s."⁶² Crespino's work shows that several strategies for containing civil rights gains co-existed in the Magnolia State, and each proved effective in its own way as well as when combined.

More broadly, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, white Southerners felt an overwhelming sense of loss and chaos, which propelled their backlash against further concessions to African Americans. Even in the late 1960s, Mississippi white supremacists still subscribed to a stereotype of African Americans that dated all the way back to the antebellum social order.⁶³ As sociologist Abby Ferber explains, although whites throughout history have typically been seen as raceless, they actually consciously defined their race and what it meant to be white through their relationships with non-whites.⁶⁴ As the Civil Rights Movement began to chip away at the racial hierarchy of the South and their relationship with African Americans shifted, white Southerners began to question who they were. In *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights*, historian Jason Sokol poignantly captures the feelings of white Southerners as white supremacy, which served as

⁶² Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 4.

⁶³ Claude H. Nolen, *The Negro's Image in the South: the Anatomy of White Supremacy* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 199-209.

⁶⁴ Abby Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 4.

the basis of their society, began to crumble. Some Southern whites, he writes, “had seen it coming for years, but were not better prepared for the civil right movement’s power to rupture their lives.”⁶⁵ Major points of contention for white Mississippians pivoted around continued efforts at school integration and increased voting rights for African Americans. In the minds of white Mississippians, African Americans pushing for these changes constituted a direct threat to their privileged way of life.

Where economic retribution and the rallying of fellow white Mississippians faltered, a return to violence reinforced the message. Lynching, a particularly gruesome act of murder, had long been a vicious aspect of Mississippi history. *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, a 1919 study published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), reported that Mississippi led the country in lynchings, murdering 373 residents in this thirty year time span, 350 of whom were black.⁶⁶ According to the definition of lynching formulated by scholar Bettina Aptheker, “There must be legal evidence that a person has been killed and that he met his death illegally at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of service to justice, race or tradition.”⁶⁷ However, as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells argued in the 1890s, the act of lynching functioned as a means of extra-legal justice, especially in cases where black men allegedly raped white women, and constituted nothing more than a farce used to disguise attempts to re-subjugate emancipated

⁶⁵ Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945- 1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 6.

⁶⁶ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: NAACP, 1919; repr., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 29, 32.

⁶⁷ Bettina Aptheker, “Woman Suffrage and the Crusade Against Lynching, 1890-1920,” quoted in Julius E. Thompson, *Black Life in Mississippi* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2001), 59.

African Americans.⁶⁸ Regardless of increasing pressure from within the African American community for the passage for federal anti-lynching legislation, white Mississippians continued this brutal practice without repercussions. In 1955, the NAACP again published literature concerning lynching, this time titled *M is for Mississippi and Murder*.⁶⁹ Perhaps one of the most famous lynchings in American history, the murder of Emmett Till, occurred in Mississippi that same year.

Three white men murdered Emmett, a fourteen year-old boy from Chicago visiting his family in Money, for apparently breaking the unwritten racial laws of the South. They claimed that he made suggestive comments to a white woman. Till's bloated, disfigured body later surfaced in the Tallahatchie River.⁷⁰ Mamie Till opted for an open casket funeral for her son and *Jet* magazine published pictures of the mutilated corpse as a testament to the sickness of American racism. Till justified her decision to allow her son's body to be shown by saying "I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby."⁷¹

Since Reconstruction, when ex-Confederates rallied white support for the Democratic Party's attempt to re-subjugate former-slaves by invoking the image of the marauding, barbarous freed black man and the vulnerability of white women, Mississippi politics had been characterized by their preoccupation with race and gender.⁷² Yet the brutality that

⁶⁸ Ida B. Wells, "A Red Record: Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1894," in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997), 75-82.

⁶⁹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *M is for Mississippi and Murder* (New York: NAACP, 1955).

⁷⁰ "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth," *Jet*, September 15, 1955.

⁷¹ Ibid; and Joyce Ladner, Personal Recollection of Civil Rights Movement, presented at conference titled "Race: The Great American Divide," Washington, D.C., January 11, 2000, <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2000/0111race.aspx?rssid=race> (accessed March 29, 2011).

⁷² David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 31-34.

seemed “normal” within the state could not remain hidden after the Till lynching gained national media attention, at least in the black press. Moreover, civil rights activists in the ensuing years depended on gripping media representations to capture attention and garner national support.

Within the black community, the photographs of Till’s disfigured corpse especially impacted an entire generation of youth, who would grow up seeking justice for that young teenager and, who coming of age in the 1960s, would lead the charge for equal rights.⁷³ Anne Moody, an African American Mississippian active in the state’s freedom movement, conveyed her feelings about the Till lynching in a shockingly honest manner. “I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till...But I also hated Negroes,” Moody confessed. “I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders...I began to look upon Negro men as cowards. I could not respect them for smiling in a white man’s face.”⁷⁴ Moody’s comments, and subsequent activism, reveal how the death of Emmet Till widened the generation gap. The older generation considered these young African Americans—who rebelled against both the racial caste system in the South and the black leaders they deemed “Uncle Toms”—radical due to their dedication to direct action and confrontation with whites.

With media attention fixed on the unrest that accompanied the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi by James Meredith, America witnessed firsthand the way that the Magnolia State’s politicians did business, with segregationist governors acting as unapologetic poster boys for the maintenance of white supremacy. During the melee,

⁷³ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 54.

⁷⁴ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 136.

Governor Ross Barnett vowed that he would be thrown in jail before he would allow his state's public schools to be desegregated.⁷⁵ A riot erupted on the Ole Miss campus later that night, killing two people.⁷⁶ Paul Johnson, the man who assumed the office after Barnett and earned a reputation for moderation, also expressed his opinions concerning court-ordered integration.⁷⁷ While serving as Barnett's Lieutenant Governor, Johnson had been one of his biggest supporters in the Meredith episode at Ole Miss. According to historian David Sansing, "On one occasion, he [Johnson] stood in the middle of University Avenue and personally blocked Meredith's entrance onto the Ole Miss campus. From that incident came the phrase 'Stand Tall with Paul,' one of the most famous campaign slogans in Mississippi history." In his inaugural address in 1964, Governor Johnson would urge white Mississippians to wage "an all-out assault on our share of tomorrow."⁷⁸

Despite threats of violence, black activists in Mississippi continued searching for strategies that would expose the state's brutality in a national spotlight. Under Bob Moses, SNCC launched a new approach for gaining attention for the plight of black Mississippians during the summer of 1964. Moses suggested bringing white college students from the North down to volunteer in voter registration efforts. This strategy was "based on Moses's analysis that the law only covers certain people in America and it doesn't cover Southern blacks, it covers Northern blacks a little bit, and it covers Northern whites a whole lot and so that if you want to bring the law to the South, you have to bring the people who the law covers to

⁷⁵ David G. Sansing, "Ross Robert Barnett: Fifty-third Governor of Mississippi: 1960-1964," Mississippi History Now, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=150> (accessed April 19, 2011).

⁷⁶ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 220.

⁷⁷ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 115-119.

⁷⁸ David G. Sansing, "Paul Burney Johnson, Jr.: Fifty-fourth Governor of Mississippi: 1964-1968," Mississippi History Now, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=151> (accessed April 19, 2011).

the South.”⁷⁹ Bob Moses knew all too well that the law would not cover those southern blacks who chose to align themselves with SNCC’s goals. When he had first arrived in Mississippi during the summer of 1961, Moses recruited a local black man, Herbert Lee, to help him in encouraging rural black Mississippians to register to vote. In response to Lee’s activism, a white man named E.H. Hurst, who was also a sitting member of the state legislature, fatally shot him. Despite Lee’s murder in broad daylight in front of multiple witnesses, E.H Hurst never went to trial. This typical example of Jim Crow justice, along with authorities’ reluctance to protect black civil rights workers, provided the basis for SNCC’s alliance with white liberal college students. Although Moses held himself partially accountable for the murder of Lee, the event motivated him to “crack Mississippi” once and for all. Moses knew that the plan to use white students as volunteers would be risky and likely result in violence, but this time he made sure the volunteers were fully aware of the danger they faced.⁸⁰

Moses’s assessment of the danger facing activists in Mississippi would prove hauntingly accurate. At the onset of Freedom Summer, one black and two white civil rights workers were abducted, killed, and later found buried in an earthen dam in Philadelphia, Mississippi. These men were last seen leaving the Neshoba County jail following their arrest on a minor traffic violation, leading many black Mississippians to believe that the county’s law enforcement officials knew about the conspiracy to kidnap and kill the three young men. Despite attempts in 1965 to try the men involved in the killings, the first case was dismissed; even so white Mississippians considered the fact that the state brought the men to trial at all a

⁷⁹ Marshall Ganz, interview, *Freedom on my Mind*.

⁸⁰ Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking, 2010), 1-2; and *Freedom on My Mind*.

sign of progress. When trying again to convict the men in 1967, the state gained convictions for six of the nineteen indicted in connection with the killings, including Deputy Sherriff Cecil Price. However, Sherriff Lawrence Rainey, the law official who initially dismissed the disappearance of the three men as a hoax concocted to make Mississippi look bad, was acquitted.⁸¹

Overtly racist rhetoric, falsely believed to be the exclusive property of southern politicians, began to creep onto the national stage the same year as Freedom Summer. The transition occurred in the lead-up to the 1964 presidential election. Former Alabama Governor George Wallace, generally considered one of the foremost racist demagogues of the civil rights era, threw his hat into the presidential race as a challenge to President Johnson, whose support of civil rights legislation left him vulnerable among white southern voters. Amazing the country, Wallace won the Wisconsin Democratic primary, signaling to politicians from both parties that opposing civil rights for African Americans could offer them an advantage at the polls. Republicans seized on the insight, and 1964 Republican nominee Barry Goldwater used opposition to the Civil Rights Act as a focal point of his campaign. Ultimately, Wallace bowed out of the race, and as Dan T. Carter states, “Barry Goldwater...replaced George Wallace as the Great White Hope for those Americans most hostile to civil rights.”⁸² What scholars have since deemed a conservative counterrevolution appeared underway, as conservative Democrats, particularly those from the South, began to flee the party of their parents and grandparents in favor of the GOP. Even John Bell

⁸¹ “19 Named in New Indictments in 3 Mississippi Rights Killings,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 1967; and “Lawrence Rainey, 79, a Rights-Era Suspect,” Obituaries, *The New York Times*, November 13, 2002.

⁸² Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), xi-xv.

Williams, then a Mississippi Senator, supported Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964, a move that prompted the National Democratic Party to revoke his House seniority.⁸³ But many others were not yet ready to make the leap, which complicated matters for black Mississippians seeking political inclusion through the Democratic Party.

Indeed, as the conservative counterrevolution slowly took shape, African Americans in Mississippi sought a viable alternative to the political exclusion they faced at the hands of the Southern Democratic political machine. At the end of Reconstruction, the Democratic Party had developed a system of disfranchisement, which included literacy tests, poll taxes, and downright violence, as way to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.⁸⁴ Such measures continued to thwart black voter registration efforts in 1964. That year, activists in Mississippi founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), challenging the monopoly that southern whites had on the Democratic Party. After holding local and state caucuses, the MFDP travelled to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, planning to challenge the seating of the all-white delegation from Mississippi. MFDP leaders proclaimed that these white delegates were not the true representatives of Mississippi since African Americans, who constituted a majority of the population in many districts, had not elected them.⁸⁵ MFDP member Fannie Lou Hamer gave an impassioned testimony in front of the National Democratic Party's Credentials Committee during which she stated, "if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this

⁸³ David G. Sansing, "John Bell Williams: Fifty-fifth Governor of Mississippi: 1968-1972," Mississippi History Now, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=152> (accessed April 25, 2011).

⁸⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 1-18.

⁸⁵ *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement*, "Mississippi: Is This America? (1962-1964)," Volume 3, Episode 1, DVD, produced/directed by Orlando Bagwell, edited by Jeanne Jordan, written by Steve Fayer (Blackside, Inc., 1990).

America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”⁸⁶ Fearing that seating the MFDP delegates in place of the all-white regular delegates would drive southern whites away from the party en masse, Johnson urged the Credentials Committee to strike a compromise. After deliberation the committee offered the MFDP two seats-at-large, which meant that two members of the MFDP delegation could take part in the convention, but they would not be allowed to represent Mississippi. MFDP members present in Atlantic City voted overwhelmingly to reject the compromise. Hamer perfectly illustrated reasoning for the decision declaring, “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired.” President Johnson abandoned the MFDP in favor of winning white southern votes that Goldwater’s open courting of segregationists put at risk.⁸⁷

After the debacle in Atlantic City, the MFDP forged ahead despite being disheartened with the American political climate. Although Johnson publicly stated that he supported the enactment of civil right legislation, including the Civil Rights Act he had signed in July, the events that transpired in August at the 1964 Democratic Convention indicate that his need to court the vote of southern whites trumped his ability to enact real change. Despite the betrayal, political realities forced members of the MFDP to return home and tell people to vote for Johnson because, “a Goldwater presidency would be disastrous for civil rights.”⁸⁸ Black Mississippians had to choose between the lesser of two evils in an election where they

⁸⁶ Fannie Lou Hamer, “Testimony Before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964,” in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan P. Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 45.

⁸⁷ *Eyes on the Prize*, “Mississippi: Is this America?”

⁸⁸ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 258.

knew neither party truly represented their interests. Heather Booth, a SNCC volunteer involved with the MFDP during the summer of 1964, captured the feeling of desperation, lamenting, “We were left wondering, where do you go from here? What is the next step? If you’ve done everything. If the official electoral process doesn’t work because blacks were excluded. And you’ve done everything you could with nonviolence and with organizing and with talking with people and being reasonable. And if that doesn’t work, where do you go next.”⁸⁹ For many, the answer was Black Power.

While the actions of the MFDP at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, which garnered considerable press coverage, may have played a role in pressuring Johnson to sign the Voting Rights Act of 1965, evidence indicates that this piece of legislation did not ameliorate the political marginalization of African Americans in Mississippi. As Frank R. Parker testifies, “The reason was that immediately after the act was passed, southern states—led by Mississippi—adopted ‘massive resistance’ strategies designed to nullify the impact of the black vote.” This latest “generation of disfranchising devices” included “racial gerrymandering of district lines, abolishing elective offices and making them appointive, and increasing the qualifying requirements for candidates running for public office.”⁹⁰ Both civil rights and nascent Black Power advocates recognized the shortcomings of federal legislation aimed at voting rights, claiming that if African Americans wanted their votes to count they would have to accomplish the feat without the involvement of white liberals. Stokely Carmichael soon pursued this exact strategy in Lowndes County, Alabama.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Heather Booth, interview, *Freedom on My Mind*.

⁹⁰ Frank R. Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1.

⁹¹ Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 2.

Following Freedom Summer and the perceived betrayal of the MFDP by white liberals, the strain of maintaining white-black race relations led to infighting within SNCC and generated calls for racial separation. As tensions rose between black and white volunteers that summer, some SNCC members argued that the white volunteers were just not well suited for working within the black community. Curtis Hayes, a black Mississippian and SNCC volunteer, alleged that these conflicts arose because, intellectually, black students from Mississippi “always felt inferior” to the northern students and in his opinion “they thought they were smarter than we were.”⁹² In 1965, led by chairman Stokely Carmichael, SNCC decided to discontinue its alliance with white liberals and asked for the resignations of white workers within the organization. As SNCC member Will Henry Rogers Jr. put it, “In...’65 we learnt that a lot of white folks had came down for the publicity and they could go back and raise a whole lot of money writing books on black folks in the South.”⁹³

Carmichael later defended his expulsion of whites from SNCC:

Liberal whites often say that they are tired of being told “you can’t understand what it is to be black”...yet the same liberals will often turn around and tell black people that they should ally themselves with those who can’t understand, who share a sense of superiority based on whiteness. The fact is that most of these “allies” neither look upon us as co-equal partners nor do they perceive the goals as any but the adoption of certain Western norms and values.⁹⁴

Carmichael deemed the interracial coalition, advocated during the early phase of the movement, a failure. In his mind, white supremacy was a global issue; thus, it affected even those whites who considered themselves “liberal” but who supported America’s Cold War

⁹² Curtis Hayes, interview, *Freedom on My Mind*.

⁹³ Will Henry Rogers Jr., interview by Robert Wright, June 29, 1969, Branch Papers, Box 104, Folder 748, UNCSHC.

⁹⁴ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 61-62.

foreign policy. Carmichael recognized the hypocrisy of white liberals who claimed to support civil rights domestically, while simultaneously condemning anti-colonialist struggles abroad, such as those conducted by the Vietcong in Vietnam. Rather than paternalistically imposing their views on African Americans, trying to remake them in their likeness, Carmichael felt that whites needed to work to eradicate the deep-seeded racism within their own community. The belief in the practical utility of racially separate movements would become an integral part of the Black Power philosophy. Clearly, the strain of maintaining cordial race relations within SNCC amid the racially charged environment in Mississippi proved more difficult than the organization had initially anticipated. What began as an attempt to bring the races together under a common cause ultimately ended up driving them further apart.

Meanwhile, the conservative counterrevolution grew stronger with the 1968 presidential election. This time it was Richard Nixon running on the Republican ticket against President Johnson's Vice President, Hubert Humphrey. Nixon knew that his victory depended on capturing the vote of conservative white southerners. Crespino demonstrates that Nixon had a decidedly "southern strategy" to his campaign, which revolved around the use of coded racist language, such as promises to ensure "quality education" and provide "law and order" to quell urban rebellions and anti-war protests that had erupted across the nation since 1965.⁹⁵ White Mississippians applauded the election of Richard Nixon. As Crespino states, "Nixon's election put highly conservative southern Republican officials in powerful positions of leadership...with clear access to the inner circles of the Nixon administration, southern Republican leaders attempted to alter national civil rights policies in

⁹⁵ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 204-205, 182.

several areas,” particularly voting rights.⁹⁶ When asked during a 1969 press conference, “How would you characterize your administration's civil rights record?” Nixon replied, “Well, the intent of our administration is to enforce the laws of this land and to develop a coordinated program in which there will be standards that everybody will understand so that we will not be subject to this criticism of our record being mixed.”⁹⁷ With Nixon’s apparent indifferent stance on civil rights, it is no wonder that the students at Jackson State directed some of their anger toward him.

Despite Nixon’s avowed support for “law and order,” white Mississippians did not fail to carry their legacy of white-on-black violence into the late 1960s. The KKK was still very much alive in Mississippi regardless of claims from governmental officials that the tactics of such white supremacist vigilante groups would be met with the full extent of the law. Although the Mississippi State Senate passed a bill in 1964 to “outlaw violence or terrorism in racial situations,” punishable by fines and/or jail time, this symbolic piece of legislation did little to thwart the activities of the KKK due to lax enforcement.⁹⁸ Klan records from the late 1960s show that they remained a force to be reckoned with in Mississippi. A 1967 run-in with the KKK, recounted by African American Kermit Stanton, as a result of his choice to run for the County Board in Supervisors in Bolivar County, demonstrates the predatory tactics of the Klan. Stanton recalled, “That’s when the Klan got involved. After I was elected, before I had taken office...the Klan sent me a package through the mail with a doll in it and a stick sticking out of the chest of the doll, and right beneath it

⁹⁶ Ibid., 222-223.

⁹⁷ Richard Nixon, “The President’s News Conference, April 18, 1969,” Papers of President Richard Nixon, The American Presidency Project Document Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2004&st=civil+rights&st1=#axzz1KktYpcCs> (accessed April 20, 2011).

⁹⁸ “Senate Takes Action to Deter Terrorism,” *Jackson Daily News*, May 13, 1964.

said ‘You.’”⁹⁹ Yet, African Americans were not the only targets of Klan intimidation. Klan propaganda distributed in Mississippi following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act showed an illustration of the crosshairs of a rifle scope, with the caption beneath reading, “TRAITORS BEWARE. Even now the cross-hairs are on the back of YOUR necks.”¹⁰⁰ Clearly, the Klan was not above turning against those whites its members deemed sympathetic to the plight of black Mississippians.

Due to condemnations from both national and state officials and the mechanization of cotton farming, which dictated less strict control over the African American population, lynchings had declined significantly.¹⁰¹ However, there were still three reported racially predicated murders between the years of 1965 and 1970; all victims were individuals who appeared to challenge the racial status quo. Two of the victims, Vernon Dahmer and Wharlest Jackson, from Hattiesburg and Natchez respectively, were leaders in their local chapters of the NAACP. Dahmer, well-known throughout his community for his commitment to registering African Americans to vote, was killed due to his civil rights activity. On the evening of January 10, 1966, KKK members firebombed Dahmer’s home by throwing flaming containers of gasoline inside and he died the next day as a result of the injuries he sustained.¹⁰² In an interview, J.C. Fairley, one of Dahmer’s friends and a fellow activist, said “We put it on the air. We had a black station here, and we put it on the air where people could go and...pay their poll tax...January 9th was when we put it on the air, on a

⁹⁹ Kermit Stanton, quoted in Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 145.

¹⁰⁰ “Cross-hairs Flyer,” Ku Klux Klan Records, 1960s-1970s, Collection #04921, Folder 3, UNCSHC.

¹⁰¹ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 18-20.

¹⁰² Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 277-278.

Saturday. Sunday, January 10th, that's when they firebombed him.”¹⁰³ Despite the public nature of what happened to Dahmer and the involvement of multiple assailants, by 1968 only one man had been convicted in connection with the murder and multiple prosecutions of those involved had ended in mistrials.¹⁰⁴ For African Americans in Mississippi the symbolism of Dahmer's murder was unmistakable; they recognized that passage of the Voting Rights Act did not protect African Americans from attack if they attempted to use the vote.

Wharlest Jackson, the treasurer for the Natchez NAACP, was killed on March 27, 1967, when a bomb exploded inside his truck as he was driving home from work at the Armstrong Rubber Company plant. Jackson had taken heat from the white community for accepting a job as a chemical mixer at the plant, a job traditionally held by white men. Once again authorities pointed the blame at KKK members, many of whom Jackson worked side-by-side with at the rubber plant. At the time of the Jackson's death, “there was widespread evidence of bitterness in the Negro community and despair over the chances of a conviction in the killing.”¹⁰⁵ As both of these cases illustrate, African Americans, stepping out of the confines of traditional race relations, which dictated compliance with white supremacy, continued to be subject to violence, even two years after federal legislation's declaring their status as equal citizens.

However, white supremacists did not only direct violence toward male activists. Southern states, such as Mississippi, had well-established histories of sexual violence against

¹⁰³ J.C. Fairley, interview, June 20, 1992, Branch Papers, Box 105, Folder 756, UNCSHC.

¹⁰⁴ “Mistrial Declared in Slaying of Negro,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1968.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Rugaber, “2,000 in March Decry Natchez Killing,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 1967; and Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 397.

African American women dating all the way back to slavery. Following the Civil War, as Rosen has observed, “sexual violence and racist rhetoric worked together to produce a climate of terror in which black men and women were forced to maneuver as they sought to claim their rights as citizens.”¹⁰⁶ During the Civil Rights Movement, according to historian Danielle McGuire, one would be hard pressed to find a black woman involved in the movement who did not have a tragic tale of sexual assault in their past. African American women were particularly vulnerable in a Southern society that demanded subservience to the will of white men. White men used rape, much like lynching, as a means of intimidation, discouraging African American women from stepping outside the bounds of their designated role. Fannie Lou Hamer captured the reality of growing up a black female in Mississippi when she famously said, “a black woman’s body was never hers alone.”¹⁰⁷

Despite clear evidence that they might become targets for vigilante groups, black activists in Mississippi continued their work and white supremacists persisted in responding with violence. One prime example was the non-fatal shooting of James Meredith, the man made famous when he integrated Ole Miss in 1962 amid riot-like conditions. During his “March Against Fear,” a voting rights march he organized from Memphis to Jackson in 1966, Meredith was shot twice in the back in a roadside ambush by Aubrey James Norvell. Ironically, Meredith’s aim in planning “The March Against Fear” was to prove that a black man could walk safely through Mississippi as means of encouraging other African

¹⁰⁶ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Danielle McGuire, “‘It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped’: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (December 2004): 909-910.

Americans to overcome their fear and exercise their right to vote.¹⁰⁸ Activist Joyce Ladner later recounted that, “This act of violence made Negro activists feel justified in calling for audacious black power. For only with black power, they contended, would black people be able to prevent events like the shooting.”¹⁰⁹ With Meredith unable to finish the march, other movement leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, stepped in to lead the march to completion.¹¹⁰ It was during this march that Carmichael called for Black Power. As the trek continued, seeing him and King walk through Mississippi with locked arms appeared contrary to initial claims that nonviolence and Black Power could not co-exist. In July of 1967, Meredith completed his march after recovering from his wounds, engaging in an act of defiance that showed the determination of African Americans. Even so, reflecting the realities of its justice system, Mississippi authorities released Norvell from jail in 1968 after serving only eighteen months in jail for attempting to kill Meredith.¹¹¹

Carmichael’s public call for Black Power, and his subsequent repudiation of non-violence, obscured the reality that black Mississippians had long relied on arms for self-protection. African American paramilitary organizations emerged in the mid-to-late 1960s, but signified this longer tradition. Knowing that they could not rely on police for protection, activists in Mississippi began joining these organizations as a means to complement their civil rights activities. Paramilitary organizations functioned as a security force for those

¹⁰⁸ James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), vii-xxii; and Michal R. Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order: Racial Violence and Constitutional Conflict in the Post-Brown South* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 211-212.

¹⁰⁹ Joyce Ladner, quoted in Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 134.

¹¹⁰ Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 488, 510-502.

¹¹¹ Walter Rugaber, “Meredith’s March Through Mississippi Ends Quietly,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1967; and “Meredith Assailant is Freed,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 1968.

engaged in work that was unpopular with the white community, such as boycotts of white-owned businesses. Established in 1965, perhaps the most well-known of these Mississippi paramilitary organizations was the Mississippi Deacons for Defense and Justice. The Deacons “believed that it was important for them to be well armed to meet the demands of protecting the Black community and the leadership and workers of the movement,” possessing ““hand grenades, machine guns, whatever we needed.””¹¹² In his autobiography, *Ready for Revolution*, Carmichael credits the Deacons for Defense with ensuring that no other protesters were shot after he and Dr. King took over Meredith’s “March Against Fear.”¹¹³

Although the Deacons for Defense succeeded in protecting activists in Mississippi, their mere existence alarmed whites. Both the State Sovereignty Commission and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) attempted to eradicate them. In 1967, the FBI tried to persuade Mississippi’s governor to push state legislation that would make it illegal for members of the Deacons to carry firearms.¹¹⁴ Although this attempt failed, these organizations continued to employ investigative techniques as a means to obstruct the work of the Deacons. Transcripts within the Sovereignty Commission’s file on the Deacons’ suggest that the Commission was either spying on the group’s meetings in Jackson or that they had someone inside the organization to keep them informed of the contents of the meetings.¹¹⁵ Thus, the Sovereignty Commission continued to hinder any civil rights activity that it deemed a threat well after civil rights legislation declared that it was illegal for state governments to subvert the civil

¹¹² Akinyele Omowale Umoja, “‘We Will Shoot Back’: The Natchez Model and Paramilitary Organization in the Mississippi Freedom Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 32 (Jan 2002): 271-277, 280.

¹¹³ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 501, 504-505.

¹¹⁴ Umoja, “‘We Will Shoot Back,’” 281.

¹¹⁵ “Deacons for Defense,” file, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed April 25, 2011).

rights of their citizens. If white America was surprised by calls for Black Power, including armed self-defense, issued publicly by Carmichael and others, white Mississippi was not.

Moreover, if the Jackson State shootings showed that tension definitely existed between white police officers and black college students, 1970 was not the first time that violence erupted on Jackson State's campus as the result of a protest. In fact, events related to the 1967 shooting death of Benjamin Brown appear eerily similar to what happened three years later. Tensions flared between police and students in May 1967 after police chased a black motorist onto campus to arrest him for a minor traffic violation. In response to what they believed to be police intimidation, Jackson State students protested on Lynch Street. When students began throwing rocks and bottles at the police who came to maintain order, the city police opened fire. Benjamin Brown, a Jackson State student and civil rights activist, was shot in the back. Despite Brown's being well-known in the community for his civil rights work, in this instance he was not actually taking part in the protest and was an innocent bystander shot and killed while walking past the protesters.¹¹⁶

During the early phase of the movement, when the ideology of nonviolent protest still guided activists' tactics, the general public met these cases of police brutality with outrage. However, as open displays of Black Power crept into the forefront of black America's struggle for equality, white America's sympathy waned in the face of a movement they no longer understood. Historian Howard Zinn claims that society's misunderstanding of civil disobedience and law and order has allowed Americans to dismiss of the death of dissenters at the hands of law enforcement as justified. Zinn argues that Americans have traditionally

¹¹⁶ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 137-139.

believed that for civil disobedience to be justified it must be nonviolent and directed toward laws that have been proven unjust by the courts. This may explain why nonviolent protests targeting segregation laws, which the Supreme Court found unconstitutional in its *Brown* ruling, gained support during the traditional phase of the movement. However, if civil disobedience does not fulfill these two qualifications, Zinn maintains that Americans feel like dissenters should readily accept their punishment.¹¹⁷ In this sense, society often deemed violence against civil rights protesters justified, especially when the movement shifted more toward Black Power, which advocated armed self-reliance.

John Bell Williams, Mississippi governor at the time of the Jackson State shootings, continued the history of race-baiting Mississippi governors into the late 1960s. A Democrat and ardent segregationist, Williams once gave an impassioned speech on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, referring to the day the Supreme Court handed down its *Brown* decision as “Black Monday.”¹¹⁸ Upon Williams’s election as governor in 1967, the Mississippi Council on Human Relations began making accusations that several high ranking members of Williams’s campaign team had strong ties to white supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan.¹¹⁹ Despite requests for Williams to take an official stance on the activities of these race hate groups, he refused, prompting Kenneth Dean, the director of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations to lament, “it is unfortunate that, at this time, it appears that a number of elected officials in our state are giving an indirect support to the

¹¹⁷ Howard Zinn, *Disobedience and Democracy: Nine Fallacies on Law and Order* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 27-53.

¹¹⁸ Sansing, “John Bell Williams.”

¹¹⁹ “Extremists Aid Williams in Voting Campaign Claim,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), November 29, 1967.

right-wing organizations.”¹²⁰ While the extent of Governor Williams’s involvement with white supremacists organizations remains unknown, he certainly shared many of their viewpoints.

As governor, Williams took particular interest in subverting national calls to comply with the *Brown* decision. It was under his watch that integration-evasion techniques, such as the use of intelligence testing as a means to assign students in the public school system, grew in popularity and in response to federal court demands that Mississippi develop an integration plan to bring about “substantial integration” by the fall of 1969. Approved by the state courts, Williams’s alternative solution dictated that the top scorers on the test would be reassigned to a formerly white school and the lowest scorers would be sent to a formerly black school. Due to the inherent white, middle-class bias of the tests, the top scorers were almost always white and the bottom scorers were almost always African Americans, meaning little changed.¹²¹ However, the Supreme Court’s 1969 decision in *Alexander v. Holmes*, which originated in the state of Mississippi, decreed that “no more delays would be tolerated.” Williams would not give up without a fight. In early 1970 he “pledged that ‘our fight has been for freedom of choice and that fight will continue on and on until we have gained ultimate victory.’” By emphasizing intelligence testing and “freedom of choice,” Williams embodied the post-civil rights, pragmatic segregationist Mississippi politician. Williams argued that his plan constituted a progressive solution to the problem of desegregation, yet this strategic accommodation halted the enactment of any reform.¹²² In a

¹²⁰ “Dean Seeks Reaction of Governor,” *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson), November 28, 1967.

¹²¹ “School Desegregation: ‘Damned if We Do and Damned if We Don’t,’” *Mississippi Freelance*, September 1969, Mississippi Freelance Records, 1968-1972, Collection #04343, UNCSHC.

¹²² Crespiño, *In Search of Another Country*, 173-204.

last-ditch attempt to subvert both the *Brown* and *Alexander* decisions, Williams endeavored to enlist the services of lawyers from across Mississippi, asking that they file school desegregation lawsuits in states of the northern and western United States, in order to “destroy” their school systems.¹²³ In the governor’s mind if the white parents in Northern and Western states were forced to make their white children go to school with black children, they would understand how those parents in the South felt and stop pushing for integration.

Williams’s efforts at stalling meaningful integration proved effective. When the protests began in Jackson in May 1970, the United States government was still demanding that Mississippi comply with the ruling in the *Brown* case. Signs that white Mississippians would discontinue their resistance to equal education did not appear promising. Moreover, their deliberate underfunding of black schools in previous decades meant that these segregated schools educated black students who chose to continue with their education at the college level, such as those attending Jackson State in 1970. Many black students felt unprepared for the rigors of higher education as a result.¹²⁴

In addition to concern over their preparedness for college, Jackson State students also had to contend with the invasion of their privacy by the Sovereignty Commission. Before the 1970 shootings occurred, the Commission received information regarding a growing Black Power Movement on campus, and began keeping track of both the movement and those students involved in it. A memorandum dated February 1970, claimed that an informant had notified Commission investigators about a Black Power organization, similar to the Black

¹²³ Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 170, 172, 196.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-32.

Panthers, which had been formed on the Jackson State campus by senior Vernon Weakly.¹²⁵

Another 1970 Commission report, which described Black Nationalist-related organizations in Mississippi, included a summary of the activities of the Afro-American Society, an organization founded by aforementioned Jackson State student Henry Thompson.¹²⁶

Beyond keeping track of civil rights activity throughout the state, the Commission also used the information it gathered to engage in techniques of intimidation and sabotage. Lew Powell, a Jackson man who established the independent liberal newspaper *Mississippi Freelance* in the late 1960s, with the goal of “reporting the otherwise unreported,” wrote an article about a 1969 encounter he had had with an investigator from the Commission. Although Powell painted the encounter in a humorous light—especially the fact that the business card given to him by the investigator said, “don’t call us, we’ll call you”—he said it was clear that the man from the Commission was attempting to intimidate him.¹²⁷ To sabotage the movement, the Commission turned its intelligence concerning who engaged in civil rights activity over to local WCC chapters to be used in economic reprisals. But, they also turned it over to all-white local draft boards so that students could be sent to Vietnam.¹²⁸ In his study of African Americans and Vietnam, James Westheider writes, “The Atlanta board may have ‘missed’ Julian Bond, but other local Southern boards were more successful, especially in Mississippi. A local draft board turned down civil rights activist Bernie

¹²⁵ Memorandum, Subject: Vernon Weakly, February 26, 1970, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed April 19, 2011).

¹²⁶ Black Nationalist Movement in Mississippi, March 20, 1970, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed April 19, 2011).

¹²⁷ ““This is Webb Burke, Mr. Powell,”” *Mississippi Freelance*, November, 1969; and “If 1969 was a Preview of the ‘70s We Don’t Want To Go,”” *Mississippi Freelance*, January 1970, Mississippi Freelance Records, 1968-1972, Collection #04343, UNCSHC.

¹²⁸ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 270; and Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 18-36.

Tucker's application for conscientious objector status, because 'he caused nothing but trouble,' with his civil rights work."¹²⁹ The Commission remained so dedicated to thwarting the freedom struggle in Mississippi that they were willing to condemn young African American men to the possibility of death on the battlefields of Vietnam.

How, then, can we rescue Jackson State from relative obscurity and place it within the history of the struggles faced by African American Mississippians? Step one involves recognizing that despite political rhetoric at the time, and traditional narratives of the Civil Rights Movement that have come after, black Mississippians continued to struggle with issues of violence and racial oppression. Violent attempts to thwart civil rights activity remained widespread, not only amongst private citizens but also within the state government, in 1970. The classical, nonviolent phase of the movement, thought to culminate with the civil rights legislation passed during the administration of President Johnson, failed to aid African Americans in achieving the level of equality they desired. While racism was a national problem, as Spofford points out, Mississippi benefitted from particularly robust forms of institutionalized white supremacy.¹³⁰ Black Mississippians continued to lack political power, either due to outright disenfranchisement or the fact that the two political parties that dominated the American scene did not represent their interests. Without political representation—the goal they had been striving for since the end of Reconstruction—African Americans would continue to be politically, socially, and economically marginalized. The lasting inability to meet on common ground shaped interactions between white and blacks. Despite all the sacrifices they had made and the work that they had done during the

¹²⁹ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 28.

¹³⁰ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

movement's classical phase, African Americans had still not achieved freedom. While some disheartened civil rights workers ceased their activity, others turned to Black Power as a tactic to achieve the yet unfulfilled promises of America.

CHAPTER 2

“No Bone To Pick With Vietnam”: Black Power And The Protests At Jackson State

Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people...are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No, I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end.¹³¹

World famous boxer Muhammad Ali spoke these words in 1966, providing a justification for why he refused to heed his draft notice. Ali's declaration exemplified a growing tide of skepticism within the African American community. Vietnam was not their war to fight. Nor was Ali alone in resisting the draft. Within four years students on America's college campuses would stand at the forefront of the antiwar movement. On two separate college campuses, protests turned violent. On May 4, 1970 at Kent State University in Ohio and ten days later at Jackson State College in Mississippi, members of Ohio's National Guard and Mississippi's Highway Patrol, dispatched to the respective campuses to restore law and order, shot and killed student protesters.¹³² Whereas the shootings at Kent State have garnered considerable historical study, the events at Jackson State remain rarely examined and even less understood. In an article that explores protest in the Vietnam War Era, Andrew Grose attempts to explain this discrepancy in the historiography claiming, "most historians have tended to focus upon the counterculture and dissident movements in the American North and West while virtually neglecting an analysis of the protest activities in other less

¹³¹ "Muhammad Ali Speak Out Against the Vietnam War (1966)," in *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, ed. Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 431.

¹³² *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 17-18.

influential areas and regions. Specifically, there has existed a major absence of scholarship of the activities of the colleges and universities of the American South.”¹³³ However, by examining anti-Vietnam protests at predominantly white Southern colleges only, Grose offers the impression that they were a decidedly white phenomenon and ignores the difficulties presented by issue of race in the South.

Jackson State’s status as a publicly-funded and predominantly black college in Mississippi further complicates studies of the shootings and has plagued those historians who have accepted the challenge of clarifying what happened in Jackson. There has been a tendency within the scholarship to over-simplify the protests at Jackson State, claiming they occurred either in response to the Vietnam War or Mississippi racism. In his 1971 work, *No Heroes, No Villains*, Robert O’Neil discounts racial tension as the primary issue in the Mississippi shootings, arguing, “to explain Jackson State in this way says nothing about the parallel occurrence at Kent, where race was not a factor.”¹³⁴ Additionally, Tim Spofford’s 1988 book, *Lynch Street*, which offers more of a summary of events than an analysis, emphasizes the importance of racial tension but fails to highlight anti-war sentiment, stating, “In ultraconservative Mississippi, there were few militants to protest the Vietnam War.”¹³⁵ However, upon a closer look, the explanation of what precipitated the protests does not appear to be *either* race *or* Vietnam, but rather *both*. When examining the Jackson State shootings through the framework promoted by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, it becomes clear that Black Power ideology influenced the students at Jackson State, causing

¹³³ Andrew Grose, “Voices of Southern Protest During the Vietnam War Era: The University of South Carolina as a Case Study,” *Peace & Change* 32 (April 2007): 154.

¹³⁴ O’Neil, *No Heroes, No Villains*, 2.

¹³⁵ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

them to draw striking comparisons between what they perceived as our government's belligerence in Southeast Asia and the poor treatment of African Americans in our own country, particularly those living in Mississippi. Students' activities spoke of this influence in the days leading up to and following the shootings on their campus. In addition to founding student organizations that advocated Black Power ideology, they helped disseminate Black Power news by establishing and distributing underground newspapers. Lastly, from a Black Power perspective, the students' decidedly aggressive actions during the protests constituted acts of armed self-reliance.

The history of the United States' involvement in Vietnam is a tale of imperialism gone awry. It started with the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, a French colony in Southeast Asia, during World War II. Historian Howard Zinn contends that during this time "a revolutionary movement had grown there, determined to end colonial control and to achieve a new life for the peasants of Indochina." Upon the defeat of Japan and end of WWII, the revolutionaries, led by communist Ho Chi Minh, appealed to Western Powers to hold true to the promise of self-determination made in the Atlantic Charter, which would have allowed the Vietnamese to rule their own country. Instead the victors of the war returned the colony to France. The French wasted no time in attempting to quell the Vietminh movement; however, they did not anticipate that this task would turn into an eight year conflict. Using such Cold War justifications as "containment" and the "domino theory," the U.S. government aided the French in their struggle against the communists, both financially and materially. Nevertheless, unable to defeat the revolutionaries under the direction of Minh, the French withdrew from French Indochina in 1954. Peace negotiations between the

French and their former colony dictated that France would slowly vacate and within two years an open election uniting North and South Vietnam would take place. Realizing that the elections of the unified Vietnamese government would likely go to the revolutionary communist leaders, the United States stepped in, and established a puppet government in South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem. At the direction of the American leaders pulling the strings, Diem cancelled the unification elections.¹³⁶ After all, as the 1961 Rusk-McNamara report stated, “The loss of South Viet-Nam to Communism would involve the transfer of a nation of 20 million people from the free world to the communism bloc. The loss of South Viet-Nam would make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the free world.”¹³⁷ Clearly the U.S. deemed intervention necessary.

Unfortunately, the U.S. did not choose an effective leader in Diem. As widespread opposition erupted to his corrupt administration, the U.S. government decided to remove Diem from power, instructing the leadership of the South Vietnamese military to stage a coup. Capitalizing on the political instability in South Vietnam, the communist forces, or Vietcong, escalated their attacks, hoping to gain control of the South. The U.S. “officially” initiated hostilities with the Vietcong in 1964, allegedly precipitated by the North Vietnamese torpedoing of an American destroyer while it patrolled international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.¹³⁸ Thus began the United States’ fight to hold back the surge of communism in Southeast Asia. As Zinn articulates, “From 1964 to 1972, the wealthiest and most

¹³⁶ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 469-472.

¹³⁷ “The Rusk McNamara Report (1961),” in *The Pentagon Papers*, ed. Neil Sheehan et al. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 150-153.

¹³⁸ Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 476. Later investigations into the Gulf of Tonkin episode revealed this event never actually occurred as stated.

powerful nation in the history of the world made a maximum military effort, with everything short of atomic bombs, to defeat a nationalist revolution in a tiny, peasant country...it was organized modern technology versus organized human beings, and the human beings won.”¹³⁹

While the Vietnam War undoubtedly touched the lives of all Americans, the experiences of black Americans appear particularly poignant. American leaders asked them to support a war carried out in the name of a country they frequently felt had betrayed and alienated them. President Johnson’s contention that “independence” and “freedom from attack” constituted the main goals of the war seemed a cruel joke to untold numbers of African Americans.¹⁴⁰ In their minds, government leaders had failed to make good on these very promises at home. Yet, in the early years of the war, they fought. James Westheider affirms that “as the war in Vietnam escalated and increasing numbers of young African Americans were drafted and sent to Southeast Asia, where many of them would be killed, opposition to both the war and the draft grew in the black community.” Whereas some African Americans opposed the war on moral grounds, lamenting that killing was wrong, a growing number framed their disagreement with the war politically and philosophically. Westheider claims, “They argued that since African Americans were not accorded the rights and privileges of citizenship, they were not obligated to fight, and possibly die, for the United States.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., 472-478, 469.

¹⁴⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address at John Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest’ April, 7 1965,” Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, National Archives and Records Administration, Online Holdings, [http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches .hom/650407.asp](http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp) (accessed November 21, 2011).

¹⁴¹ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 19-36.

Despite their objections, the government drafted African Americans in unbalanced numbers, due to a college deferment system that favored whites and the unfair decisions of local draft boards. According to Westheider, draft boards, often composed unanimously of white men, let personal racism sway their decisions. African Americans applying for hardship deferment and contentious objector status had their requests denied by draft boards that based their decisions on negative racial preconceptions. Furthermore, the selective service's college deferment policy, which would allow exemption from the draft for men enrolled in college, reflected deeper institutional racism, since "in America, race is often a key determining factor of one's socioeconomic class and educational level." These influences combined to create a military force comprised of a disproportionate number of black men: despite constituting only 11 percent of the draft-eligible population, African Americans represented 14.3 percent of those drafted.¹⁴²

Within the African American community, those advocating Black Power offered the most vocal critique of the war. Not surprisingly, that criticism came first from college aged black men, those most likely to be drafted. Peniel Joseph notes that SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael "emerged ... as the spokesman for a generation of black radicals [and] the undisputed leader of Black Power" in the mid-to-late 1960s.¹⁴³ Carmichael and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton set forth their definition of Black Power in the ambitious 1967 work, *Black Power*, prefacing the book by stating, "This book is about why, where and in what manner black people in America must get themselves together. It is about black people taking care of business—the business of and for black people...if we fail to do this, we face

¹⁴² Ibid., 20-24.

¹⁴³ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, xvii, 142-161.

continued subjection to a white society that has no intention of giving up willingly or easily its position of priority and authority.”¹⁴⁴

Emphasizing institutional racism as opposed to individual prejudice, Carmichael and Hamilton framed their ideology by drawing a parallel between colonialism at home and abroad. They argued, “Black people in the United States have a colonial relationship to the larger society, a relationship characterized by institutional racism,” with the colonial (white) power structure subjugating blacks politically, economically, and socially through a combination of indirect rule, economic exploitation and dependency, and social subordination. Due to their adopting this colonialist framework, Carmichael and Hamilton connected the dilemma facing African Americans “as closely related to liberation struggles around the world.” The authors contended that African Americans could throw off imperial oppression through “Black Power,” which had to begin with the redefinition of the black community and the eradication of “cultural terrorism.” Once African Americans recognized “the need to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture; to create their own sense of community and togetherness,” the authors asserted, “they can begin to deal effectively with the problems of racism.” Ridding society of racism would take what they termed “political modernization:” the questioning and possible rejection of American institutions and values that perpetrated racism; experimenting with new political ideologies as a means of solving societal ills; and “real” broad-based participation in the political decision making process.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, xv.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-32, xix, 35-39.

Along this journey to political modernization, African Americans would have to take some difficult yet vital actions. First, they needed to “close ranks [and] consolidate behind their own, so that they can bargain from a position of strength,” refusing to align themselves with liberal whites unwilling to fully challenge “Anglo-conformity,” and the middle-class blacks who often became their pawns. While these liberals claimed to support racial equality in the U.S., they simultaneously endorsed the government’s Cold War foreign policy in Vietnam. Carmichael and Hamilton also called into the question the value of the Civil Rights Movement’s endorsement of non-violence as a noble goal. They argued that the early civil rights struggle was geared toward an audience of middle-class whites and the strategy of non-violence acted as a buffer zone between understandably frustrated blacks and the movement’s audience. “If the nation fails to protect its citizens,” they argued, “then that nation cannot condemn those who take up the task themselves,” through armed self-reliance; “*there can be no social order without social justice.*”¹⁴⁶ Only through the fulfillment of these revolutionary proposals could African Americans break free from their oppression as colonial subjects within their own country.

The colonial framework described by Carmichael and Hamilton dovetailed with the condemnation of the Vietnam War within Black Power circles. By 1966, SNCC had emerged as a force within the Black Power Movement under the leadership of Carmichael. That year SNCC issued a statement reflecting this connection between the government’s suppression of the anti-imperialist revolution in Vietnam and the continued inequality of African Americans in the U.S. Highlighting a pervasive distrust of the white power structure, SNCC’s official

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 40-56, 62. [Emphasis in original].

position on the war stated, “We believe the United States government has been deceptive in claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for the freedom of colored people in such other countries... and in the United States itself.” Furthermore, taking a stand on instances of draft resistance by African Americans, an act government authorities deemed a crime, the authors of the SNCC statement declared, “We are in sympathy with and support the men in this country who are unwilling to respond to a military draft ... We take note of the fact that 16 percent of the draftees from this country are Negro, called on to stifle the liberation of Vietnam, to preserve a ‘democracy’ which does not exist for them at home.”¹⁴⁷ Clearly, for a segment of the African American community race and the Vietnam War were inextricably linked.

However, by the late 1960s even those African American activists who initially appeared reluctant to speak out against the war for fear of diverting attention from civil rights concerns at home began to publicly question our actions in Southeast Asia. On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a rousing speech at Riverside Church in New York City in which he professed that nonviolent struggle for civil rights and the war against the Vietnamese could not co-exist. As a champion of nonviolent protest, King was becoming increasingly concerned with poverty, urban unrest, and the growing tide of Black Power. However, he claimed that when confronting those young African Americans who had abandoned nonviolence, “they asked, and rightly so, ‘What about Vietnam?’ They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted.” As a result of this exchange, King admitted, “Their questions hit

¹⁴⁷ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Position Paper on Vietnam (January 6, 1966),” in *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, 427-428; and Westheimer, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 29-36.

home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government. For the sake of those boys...for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.”¹⁴⁸ King had clearly emerged from the war debate on the anti-war side, framing his disagreement in decidedly racial terms. His decision to break his silence regarding the war would ultimately cost him the backing of those white liberals, including President Johnson, who did not see any hypocrisy in claiming to support racial equality at home while favoring the suppression of the Vietnamese quest for self-determination.¹⁴⁹

Black Americans by no means had a monopoly on disagreement with the war. An overwhelmingly unpopular war by historical standards, as Zinn states, the Vietnam War triggered “the greatest antiwar movement the nation had ever experienced.” Anti-war protests escalated as “the cruelty of the war began touching the conscience of many Americans;” however, the anti-war movement reached a fever pitch in 1970.¹⁵⁰ Despite his 1968 campaign promise to gradually diminish the United States’ presence in Vietnam, President Richard Nixon instead took steps to deepen our involvement in Southeast Asia. On April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced his decision to invade Cambodia, claiming that the Vietcong’s use of neutral Cambodia as a safe haven seriously undermined the United States’ efforts in

¹⁴⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 133-164.

¹⁴⁹ “Dr. King’s Error,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 1967; and “Transcript of the President’s News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1967.

¹⁵⁰ Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 469, 483.

Vietnam.¹⁵¹ Nixon's announcement provoked outrage among Americans who opposed our involvement in Southeast Asia and viewed the invasion of Cambodia as yet another illegal act of aggression. Protests in the wake of the televised broadcast surpassed previous anti-war social demonstrations. Nowhere were the protests louder than on the nation's college campuses, including Mississippi's historically black Jackson State College.¹⁵²

The protests at Jackson State were not unexpected and undirected, as claimed by both reports at the time and subsequent reconstructions of the event, but rather the result of a growing movement on Jackson State's campus. Days before the supposedly unanticipated outbreak of protests on campus, students and faculty held a rally. Both University President Dr. John Peoples and Student Body President Warner Buxton mentioned this gathering in their interviews with the President's Commission on Campus Unrest. When asked by the Commission whether or not any indication that a disturbance could potentially take place on campus had existed, Peoples responded by stating that on May 8 there was a "mass meeting" of approximately 300 people on the steps of the university's dining hall, during which students and faculty alike expressed themselves.¹⁵³ Warner Buxton estimated the number in attendance at about 500, adding that, "some of the students were concerned that we should show respect for students at Kent State and we should dramatize that we were also not in keeping with Mr. Nixon's movement to Cambodia. So, to express this dissent, we decided to

¹⁵¹ Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," April 30, 1970, Washington D.C., The American Presidency Project Document Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2490&st=&st1=#axzz114n0W1xJ> (accessed January 31, 2012).

¹⁵² "At War with War," *Time*, May 18, 1970.

¹⁵³ Dr. John Peoples, interview, *President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, Jackson, Mississippi, Tuesday, August 11, 1970, [transcripts of witnesses' testimony] Vol. 1, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [Archive hereafter cited as MDAH].

have a rally.”¹⁵⁴ Rally organizers, under the direction of Buxton, called themselves the Committee of Concerned Students and Citizens (CCSC). After the shootings on May 14, the CCSC stepped up their organizing, planning additional rallies and releasing a statement on May 21, outlining a list of goals and objectives that they claimed would “halt the unwarranted murders [sic] of Jackson State College students.” Chief among their demands was the “relinquishment...of the city’s title to Lynch Street,” which would reroute traffic around campus and give responsibility to handle conflicts that arose in that area of campus to campus authorities. Also, the CCSC argued that African Americans should receive 50 percent representation on Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning of the State of Mississippi, which made decisions affecting Jackson State, claiming the board did not “presently reflect the thinking of all segments of the state community.”¹⁵⁵ In 1970 the board had no African American members. This would not change until 1972, when Governor William Waller appointed the first black trustee to the board.¹⁵⁶ Historians often fail to connect these student-led movements on black college campuses to the Black Power Movement, Joy Ann Williamson claims, because students focused on campus-based issues, attacking the vestiges of white supremacy in their immediate environment. However, she also contends, “That students focused most of their attention inward did not change the underlying purpose of their activism: increased power, self-determination, and autonomy.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Warner Buxton, interview, *President’s Commission on Campus Unrest*, Wednesday August 12, 1970, Vol. 2, MDAH.

¹⁵⁵ “Goals and Objectives,” Committee of Concerned Students and Citizens, May 21, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 1, University Archives, H.T. Sampson Library, Jackson State University. [Archive hereafter cited as JSUA].

¹⁵⁶ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 159.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-132, 134-136.

In fact, the May 8 rally did not represent an isolated incident, but was actually part of a larger movement on Jackson State's campus. The establishment of Black Power organizations by students provides clear evidence of this. While these campus-led groups with ties to the Black Power Movement kept their activities relatively secret, they surface a few times within the files of Mississippi's unofficial investigative agency, the State Sovereignty Commission. A February 1970 Commission memo concerning Jackson State senior Vernon Weakley charged that he had founded a Black Power organization on campus similar to the Black Panthers, solely for the purpose of perpetrating violence against the white community. Weakley also allegedly worked with Howard Spencer, a well-known leader in Jackson's Black Power Movement, whose connections included other national Black Power activists Cleveland Sellers, Willie Ricks, and Stokely Carmichael.¹⁵⁸ Another Commission report offered a "summary of Black Nationalist activity in Mississippi," including several organizations operating in Jackson. Among them were the "'Black and Proud' Liberation School" created by Spencer to "teach black awareness, black power and black militancy ... [to] Negro youths ages 8-13," and the Afro-American Society (AAS), a fifteen member black student group on Jackson State's campus. The report noted that the AAS "has sponsored on-campus demonstrations and occasionally leaders indicate support and familiarity with BPP [Black Panther Party] philosophy."¹⁵⁹ Campus-based organizations,

¹⁵⁸ "Vernon Weakley, N/M, 131 West Oakley Street," memorandum, February 26, 1970, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 24, 2011); and Photograph of Howard Spencer, Cleveland Sellers, Willie Ricks, and Stokely Carmichael at Jackson Municipal Airport, May 18, 1967, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 26, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ "Black Nationalist Movement in Mississippi," report, March 20, 1970, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 24, 2011).

such as the AAS, had strong ties to the larger Black Power Movement, but historian Ibram Rogers has rightly claimed that historians have overlooked this relationship.¹⁶⁰

Circulation of Black Power news through independent media sources reveals the dialogue taking place on Jackson State's campus leading up to the protests. Early 1968 saw the establishment of an underground newspaper, the *Gadfly*, on the campus. In a series of letters mailed to *The Blue and White Flash*, Jackson State's official university newspaper, individuals calling themselves the Gadflies criticized the editors of the administration-sanctioned newspaper, stating, "You appear to believe that we are living in the best of all possible worlds... Are the students here so contented as to remain silent forever about the seemingly hopeless situation of which we pay to be a part? Well, we ARE NOT!"¹⁶¹ Providing an alternative to *The Flash*, which the Gadflies deemed no more than a university "publicity brochure," the disgruntled students began publishing the *Gadfly* from an undisclosed location on Jackson State's campus. Files from the State Sovereignty Commission indicate that the publication "was beamed toward Black Power." Commission investigators took particular interest in the new newspaper, not only because of its content—especially its "attacking of Jackson State policies and curriculum"—but also because the paper would not reveal the names of its editorial staff.¹⁶²

Kudzu, another underground Jackson newspaper, emerged as the brainchild of a group of leftist students from a handful of Mississippi's predominantly white colleges, such

¹⁶⁰ Ibram Rogers, "The Marginalization of the Black Campus Movement," *Journal of Social History* 42 (Fall 2008): 175.

¹⁶¹ Gadflies to Editors of the *Flash*, letter, 1968, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 25, 2011).

¹⁶² "The Gadfly," memorandums, January 29, 1968, February 9, 1968, February 12, 1968, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 25, 2011).

as the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, University of Southern Mississippi, and Millsaps College. Cover art from their first issue included the tagline, “Subterranean news from the heart of old Dixie.” *Kudzu*’s inaugural article titled, “Generational Revolt,” firmly established the editors’ attitude toward race, declaring, “we now strive to ally ourselves...with the black movement for liberation.”¹⁶³ Using the word “liberation” to describe the movement to ameliorate racially-based social ills indicates the influence of Black Power’s anti-colonial framework on the staff at *Kudzu*. The paper quickly gained readers at Jackson State, through articles that conveyed a common hatred of Mississippi’s conservative white power structure, as well as Black Power-tinged articles geared directly toward the African American community. For example, *Kudzu*’s March 1970 issue featured an article about racism at Ole Miss, an open letter of justification from a draft dodger, and prophetically, an article regarding police brutality against African Americans.¹⁶⁴ During the turmoil at Jackson State, student activist Degecha X, who emerged as a spokesman of the discontented campus element, used the off-campus *Kudzu* office as a base camp from which to conduct media interviews.¹⁶⁵ While this coalition between African Americans and white leftists appears contradictory to Black Power’s separatist ideology, historian Blake Slonecker argues that “cooperation between black and white activists—albeit in a relationship under continual tension—suggests that the consolidation of a singular Movement in the late 1960s was possible.”¹⁶⁶ Black students appeared willing to tactically

¹⁶³ “Generational Revolt,” *Kudzu*, September 18, 1968, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 24, 2011).

¹⁶⁴ *Kudzu*, March 1970, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 24, 2011).

¹⁶⁵ Williams, “Jackson State College,” 67.

²⁵ Blake Slonecker, “The Columbia Coalition: African Americans, New Leftists, and Counterculture at the Columbia University Protest of 1968,” *Journal of Social History* 41 (Summer 2008): 968.

align themselves with white leftists when their goals and objectives overlapped, such as the desired destruction of the entrenched conservative white power structure.

In the aftermath of the shootings, *Kudzu* published an edition titled, “Jackson State Massacre,” with a cover featuring a photo of the bullet-riddled facade of Alexander Hall. Although the authors wrote the article as “a documentary account of what occurred on the Jackson State College campus on the nights of May 13th and 14th,” their coverage was by no means unbiased. *Kudzu* writers sided with the black students at Jackson State, clearly placing the blame in the hands of law enforcement. Emphasizing the lack of concern that white officers had for black students, the writers proclaimed, “When the officers finished shooting, they picked up their empty shells and put them in their pockets. Students asked them to help with the wounded and they would not. One officer finally was heard to radio in, ‘Send over some ambulances. We’ve got some niggers in the dorm.’”¹⁶⁷ The coverage offered by *Kudzu* appeared unique at a time when mainstream newspapers in Jackson, such as the *Jackson Daily News* and *Clarion-Ledger*, implied that the students needed controlling. Conservative news sources even went so far as to attack *Kudzu*’s coverage of the shootings, calling it “pretentious” and “questionable.” In an article titled “The Kudzu Syndrome,” Charles B. Gordon, a *Jackson Daily News* staff writer, complained, “It’s all based so strongly in trash and tripe and error and overweening obscenity of thought and word that trying to read and discuss it boggles the mind.”¹⁶⁸

Moreover, the statements offered by the students themselves indicate that they connected both the racial discrimination they faced in Mississippi and the perceived

¹⁶⁷ “Jackson State Massacre,” *Kudzu*, May 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 1, JSUA.

¹⁶⁸ Charles B. Gordon, “The Kudzu Syndrome,” *Clarion-Ledger*, May 31, 1970.

subjugation of the Vietnamese people to white imperialism. This global scope constituted one of the defining characteristics of the Black Power philosophy. Students offered striking statements throughout the course of both the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) and the Scranton Commission's investigations into the causes of the tragedy at Jackson State. When asked about precipitating factors, students frequently pointed to a combination of forces, mainly the war and racial discrimination. During an FBI interview, one student poignantly stated that "in his opinion this incident did not start recently but started as far back as September 1969. He believed that the Anti-Vietnam Committee started to influence and to attempt to get the war veterans on campus to join with them. He stated that they had organized enough of a following to cause trouble and turmoil all during the school year."¹⁶⁹ Another set of students interviewed by the FBI claimed that they had attended the on-campus rally of May 8 and that afterward "About ten or more students left the rally dissatisfied with its outcome. These students made plans to create incidents to be performed on JSC's campus 5/13/1970 in order to have the National Guard and the local police agencies brought on campus to focus national attention on their grievances."¹⁷⁰ Visible unrest did indeed occur on May 13 and, as one student told the FBI, he heard a gathering of students outside Alexander Hall heatedly discussing Nixon's Cambodia speech, and further calling the President's supposed endorsement of integration a sham.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ FBI interview with Jackson State student, conducted May 28, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 3, Section 15, JSUA.

¹⁷⁰ FBI Interview with two Jackson State students, conducted May 23, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 3, Section 11, JSUA.

¹⁷¹ FBI interview with Jackson State student, conducted May 23, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 3, Section 12, JSUA.

Witness testimony offered by students as part of the President's Commission further revealed the wave of discontent that had been circulating on Jackson State's campus prior to the violence. Faries Adams, a Jackson State student, perfectly summed up the students' position when asked if Vietnam and Cambodia constituted a primary concern on campus by replying, "we think that until the Nation ceases to send young men to fight wars they believe are unjust, that a major portion of this problem will remain on our campus, the tension and unrest; because they are afraid of the draft..."¹⁷² Buxton, who would emerge as a leader in the aftermath of the shootings, gave an answer that reflected Black Power ideology when asked a similar question, declaring, "I think that all of the issues on campus grew out of the fact of the racist impressionistic makeup of the country. And the fact that blacks are more in proportion in Vietnam than they are in the country is a product of economic repression and black racism."¹⁷³ These ideas clearly stuck with Buxton. In a 1982 interview with Tim Spofford, Buxton exclaimed, "If the students were going to get drafted they didn't want to go. They had no bone to pick with Vietnam."¹⁷⁴ Student Henry Thompson, otherwise known as Degecha X, offered the strongest opinions concerning the unrest on Jackson State's campus, and as a leader in Jackson's Black Power Movement, he had a platform from which to do it. Looking back at a May 9 rally he had organized at Smith Park near the Governor's Mansion, Degecha X proclaimed "we were trying to bring out some of the injustices of the war that day...they were sending black soldiers over there to fight people we didn't know a damned thing about. I wanted to bring to people's attention that we were fighting people that

¹⁷² Faries Adams, interview, *President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, Tuesday, August 11, 1970, Vol. 1, MDAH.

¹⁷³ Warner Buxton, interview, *President's Commission on Campus Unrest*.

¹⁷⁴ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 35.

never called us ‘niggers’ before.”¹⁷⁵ Clearly, students merged their arguments against the war with social commentary concerning the poor state of race relations in the U.S.

Disillusionment among African Americans only increased as a result of the shootings and the subsequent investigations of the deaths. Many members of the Jackson State community realized the pretension of these inquiries before they even concluded. Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, a professor at Jackson State, offered witness testimony to the President’s Commission wrought with criticism of the system and dire predictions for the future. Not only did Dr. Alexander castigate the system, claiming that African Americans had no “fantasy” that the government would take steps to mitigate the damage done on campus, she even went so far as to state that African Americans would not be surprised if the government rounded them up into concentration camps and exterminated them Holocaust-style. In response to the question of whether or not the African American response should be one of self-defense she retorted, “We could let them go and mow us down with machine guns.”¹⁷⁶ Bound by the same constraints as administrators, professors at public black colleges rarely spoke out in this candid manner for fear of retribution. Mississippi’s Board of Trustees policed the conduct of faculty at the state’s colleges, severely limiting the academic freedom of both professors and students, and firing teachers caught speaking out in favor of a liberal agenda.¹⁷⁷ Yet, even the officially sanctioned campus newspaper, *The Blue and White Flash*, published a series of scathing articles on the one year anniversary of the shootings, condemning the state’s and national government’s inaction. An article titled, “What’s a Little

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷⁶ Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, interview, *President’s Commission on Campus Unrest*, Thursday, August 13, 1970, Vol. 3, MDAH.

¹⁷⁷ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 62-85.

Murder of Blacks,” bewailed, “the established order mustered its best...and yet there is not the slightest chance anything will be done about it...the message to blacks and students will be that even when the established order does its highest best, there is no discernible effect. Disillusion will be deepened. The number of those who drop out, who abandon hope in normal politics and reason, will increase.”¹⁷⁸ As this statement implies, the failure of the government to place responsibility for the shootings firmly in the hands of the white police officers exacerbated students’ impatience with inaction and drove many further toward embracing Black Power.

Student protests in the days leading up to May 14 had taken on a more hostile tone, yet, the aggressive nature of the students’ protests can be explained through Black Power’s endorsement of armed self-reliance against assaults by whites. Amid the environment of unrest, student threw rocks and other foreign objects at white motorists travelling down Lynch Street, and a small group of protesters attempted to firebomb the college’s Reserve Officers’ Training Corps facilities. To a large extent, such acts constituted an expression of armed self-reliance. In reality, the absence of legal protection and justice forced African Americans to act in defense of their own communities. Attempting to explain the hostile actions of black student protesters to the President’s Commission, student Andrea Brendetta Reese linked the students’ anger with campus, national, and international concerns:

They threw rocks because they are angry. And they throw rocks at cars passing on Lynch Street, those cars carrying whites. Because, I guess, always in the back of your head you are thinking somebody hasn’t been doing something right all along and if you can’t get to the source, get to the next best thing. It is like wanting to burn down

¹⁷⁸ *The Blue and White Flash*, May 1971, Jackson State College, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 2, JSUA.

the ROTC Building you know. If you are unhappy with what the military is doing in Cambodia or Vietnam, well you can't go to them so you go to one of their establishments and that is the ROTC. And if you are angry about anything that has political or social overtones, and if you can't get to the politicians and government officials that are white here...then you go to the next best thing, you get something that looks a little like them, I guess.¹⁷⁹

Students' actions appeared both calculated and symbolic, attacking those institutions within their daily environment that represented their manipulation at the hands of the white power structure. Explicating these actions becomes less problematic when studied in context.

Students' violent reactions developed as a result of a lifetime of experience with racism and legal marginalization. An article that appeared in a 1971 issue of *Close Up*, "Violence and the JSC Student," illustrated this point, stating, "You see, when we talk about violence on the campus of our black institutions, it is a different kind of violence than at other institutions. This is not violent action by students against institutions, in most cases, but rather a reaction to violence against them as black students."¹⁸⁰

Lynch Street had long been a contentious area, often resembling a front line between black students and white Jackson residents. Jackson State students frequently complained that white motorists travelling down Lynch Street had little concern for the safety of those walking across the road. As the President's Commission Report recapitulated, "Lynch Street connects downtown Jackson, which is to the east, with white neighborhoods farther west...For years, college authorities have urged closing to automobile traffic the portion of Lynch Street that passes through campus. Publicly, the problem of safety to pedestrians has

¹⁷⁹ Andrea Brendetta Reese, interview, *President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, Tuesday, August 11, 1970, Vol. 1, MDAH.

¹⁸⁰ Aurelia Young, "Violence and the JSC Student," *Close Up*, February 1971, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 5, Folder 6, JSUA.

been cited as the reason for the request.”¹⁸¹ White motorists’ striking black students, often receiving no punishment, led students to instigate protests on the campus in the years prior to 1970. 500 students protested the hitting of Jackson State student Mamie Ballard by a white male motorist in early February 1964, by blocking traffic down Lynch Street. Jackson City Police, in full riot gear, responded to the unrest, dispersing the students using tear gas.¹⁸² In the wake of these demonstrations, then University President Jacob Reddix stated that he hoped the State Building Commission would construct a concrete bridge-like structure over Lynch Street to offer safe passage to his students.¹⁸³ State officials ignored his request. Again in 1965, demonstrations began “after a Jackson State college coed was struck on Lynch Street by a white male hit-and-run motorist and received serious injuries. The driver of the car was never apprehended.”¹⁸⁴ African American students, leaders, and university officials once again requested that the state pay to build an “overhead walkway” across Lynch Street, connecting the two sides of Jackson State’s campus, in May 1967.

Unrest had also developed on the campus that same year due to another traffic related conflict; the protests ended tragically when city police shot and killed student Benjamin Brown.¹⁸⁵ Given this history of conflict with white motorists on Lynch Street, students’ decision to throw rocks and bottles at white passersby during the 1970 protests represented more than an aimless expression of anger and frustration. Rather it functioned as a form of

¹⁸¹ *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 414.

¹⁸² “Students Protest Accident,” *Clarion-Ledger*, February 4, 1964; and “Agitators’ Blamed in College Rioting,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 4, 1964.

¹⁸³ “Student Demonstration at Jackson State College,” investigative report, February 10, 1964, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 26, 2011).

¹⁸⁴ *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 414.

¹⁸⁵ “Jackson State College,” memorandum, May 12, 1967, Sovereignty Commission Online, MDAHDC (accessed November 26, 2011).

armed self-reliance. The law had failed these black students; white motorists who struck them did not face repercussions, so they took the reins and acted in their own defense. White motorists driving through the middle of Jackson's predominantly black campus via Lynch Street became such a flashpoint following the 1970 shootings that the city finally ceded control of the thoroughfare to the college; college officials subsequently decided to close the street to all motor vehicle traffic. This decision also removed the most immediate point of contact and contention between black Jackson State students and white Jackson residents.¹⁸⁶

Considering the military's unequal draft practices, mandatory service, and possible death of reluctant African American draftees, students viewed the presence of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) on their campus as yet another example of their exploitation for the benefit of white society. As one female student interviewed by the FBI put it, "they are dissatisfied with the U.S. government's policy regarding the war in Viet Nam and Cambodia. Most of the students believe the United States should not be fighting in these countries and the male students will do almost anything to avoid being drafted into the Army and being sent to fight in Viet Nam."¹⁸⁷ Young black male students realized that if the government drafted them, they faced a good chance of dying on the battlefields of Vietnam, fighting a war to which they objected. Government officials unjustly imperiled the lives of African American men by drafting them into the armed forces and sending them to Southeast Asia. Again, students' desire to firebomb the ROTC building during the May 13 protests can be seen as an act of armed self-reliance; they targeted the institution that could potentially place them in harm's way and even result in their untimely death. One student interviewed by

¹⁸⁶ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 176-180.

¹⁸⁷ FBI Interview with Jackson State student, conducted May 23, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 3, Section 11, JSUA.

the FBI recounted, “individuals yelled, ‘burn the ROTC Building.’ He advised that this group seemed to feel justified in doing this inasmuch as members of this group had stated that NIXON was no longer interested in integration of the races.”¹⁸⁸ Fed up with Vietnam, Nixon, and the draft, students attacked the symbol of the war, military, and the Nixon administration within their immediate environment: the ROTC.

The 1970 protests on Jackson State’s campus, and the subsequent reaction to the resulting deaths, were connected to Black Power in a handful of ways. Leading up to the protests, students experienced disillusionment with nonviolent activism and as a result, many joined Black Power organizations both to express this discontent and to experiment with new tactics. Campus-based organizations, such as the CCSC and AAS, emerged as part of a larger Black Campus Movement, which had strong ties to the national Black Power Movement. Ideology guiding these Black Power organizations enjoyed dissemination across campus due to the proliferation of underground newspapers, such as the *Gadfly* and *Kudzu*. Interestingly, though relationships forged with the white editors of the *Kudzu* tested the boundaries of Black Power’s rejection of interracial coalitions, black students appeared willing to create strategic alliances with white leftists, who, like them, believed that the basic structure of American society needed dramatic revision. Lastly, when critically analyzing the violent actions taken by Jackson State students through the framework of Black Power, it becomes clear that aggressive aspects of the protests can be interpreted as a form of armed self-reliance. Students felt that the law had too long failed to protect them from the recklessness of white motorists travelling down Lynch, so they took matters into their own hands,

¹⁸⁸ FBI Interview with Jackson State student, conducted May 23, 1970, Gibbs-Green Memorial Collection, Vol. 3, Box 3, Section 12, JSUA. [Emphasis in original].

wielding rocks and bottles against passing cars carrying whites. Also, with a wary eye to developments in Vietnam, students unsuccessfully attempted to firebomb the ROTC building, a symbol of the misguided American military, an institution that had the power to decide their future. With the link between Black Power and the protests at Jackson State established, the question remains whether the involvement of Black Power, in both the protests and the public reaction to them, contributed to the selective remembering and forgetting that has occurred in historical reconstructions of the event.

CHAPTER 3

What Happened to Jackson State?: The Silencing of a Narrative

...this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it...it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.¹⁸⁹

“Four dead in Ohio.” In our country these words have the power to invoke a strong emotional response. They call forth iconic images, primarily Kent student Jeffrey Miller’s lifeless body lying on the ground, a river of blood trailing from his head, and teenager Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling next to his body, screaming in agony. Even with the passing of the forty year anniversary of what occurred at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, these images remain deeply ingrained in our country’s collective memory.¹⁹⁰ However, what about the words “Two dead in Mississippi?” Do they summon images of two victims, Jackson State student Phillip Gibbs and high school student James Green? How about the striking image of a women’s college dormitory building riddled with bullet holes? For the large majority of Americans, the shootings that occurred at Jackson State College in Mississippi a mere ten days after Kent State go unremembered.¹⁹¹

Looking back upon the shootings at Jackson State College thirty years later, a piece that appeared in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* lamented, “The images of Kent State...are emblazoned on the memories of all who lived through those turbulent times.

¹⁸⁹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 5-6.

¹⁹⁰ “The Shootings at Jackson State University: Thirty Years Later,” 43.

¹⁹¹ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 80-84.

Jackson State...is a footnote in the history books if it appears at all. Few Americans...are even aware that the tragedy occurred.”¹⁹² Why do the Kent State shootings have such a prominent place in our country’s collective memory, whereas the similar events at Jackson State have been largely forgotten?

Silences within a given society’s shared historical memory occur with astonishing frequency. The production of history is a contentious and active process. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot insists that silencing takes place at distinct junctures in the history-making process, stating, “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).” According to Trouillot, each of the steps “involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”¹⁹³ Those with power and access to the means of history production decide what is worth remembering and what can be forgotten. History is written from the perspective of the powerful, often silencing marginalized groups. Thus, examining dominant perspectives and silences in the historical record can reveal a society’s power dynamics.

Trouillot’s first three steps appear of particular interest because collectively, they have the ability to guide the trajectory of the entire historical production process. Together they define the “making of history in the final instance.” Trouillot claims that although sources involved in the first three steps seem to “turn event into fact,” they are themselves

¹⁹² “The Shootings at Jackson State University,” 43.

¹⁹³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26, xix.

unnaturally created and assembled and encompass both “mentions and silences of various kinds and degrees.”¹⁹⁴ Narratives and histories built upon “facts” reproduce the same pattern of “mentions and silences” inherent in the sources from which they derive. Sources created regarding the shootings in Jackson impacted the manner in which these events would be remembered historically, and historical reconstructions produced using them reflect the “mentions and silences” within them.

Nonetheless, one factor Trouillot does not account for is time. Some primary sources, such as news media reports, simultaneously perform the first three steps in Trouillot’s process—the making of sources, the making of archives, and the making of narratives—thereby limiting opportunities for reflection between the initial event and history. News agencies begin with “fact” creation by presenting the public with the “truth” of what occurred; they play a major role at the moment of “fact” assembly and through preservation of the “facts” in their archives; and they aid “fact” retrieval when historians access their coverage when constructing narratives. Despite Americans’ belief that news agencies simply report the “facts,” they are subject to bias and this bias carries over into the archives. From there, the story has the possibility of becoming even more skewed as scholars unequally access the coverage, deciding which “facts” to include in their narrative of an event and which to omit. Only through critical analysis of media sources, paying attention to what is explicitly stated, reading between the lines to discern what is not directly said, and gleaning meaning from what is not mentioned, can the concealing of the Jackson State narrative be unraveled.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 48.

Accordingly, such sources offer a unique opportunity to get at the root of questions concerning how the Jackson State shootings appeared in the national media and thus, how the country as a whole encountered, digested, and remembered them. Since these print media sources are mediated for mass consumption, decisions concerning content can offer valuable insight into the interpretation of the events in Jackson and how these interpretations became written into history. Perhaps Edward P. Morgan best articulated the value of examining national mass media outlets as a means of getting at questions of collective memory. He writes,

Mass media's construction of the past is governed first and foremost by the imperative of maximizing audiences and readers. Their selective memory then invariable reflects fundamental economic, organizational and ideological forces at work within a capitalistic economy. As such, the mass media plays a crucial role in creating the foundations of *common*, or near universal public discourse and public memory within a culture.¹⁹⁵

While the first three steps directly impact memorialization and significance, this deconstruction and rebuilding of events actually occurs later in Trouillot's fourth step, the moment of retrospective significance. Still, for many Americans, media reports represent the only meaningful engagement they have with the events that will be written into history. Most never reap the benefits of the moment of retrospective significance that occurs in the final step of history making. Americans rarely engage with historical scholarship that treats the sources that they take for granted as "factual" to critical analysis. "To be sure, the distance

¹⁹⁵ Edward P. Morgan, "The Good, The Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement" in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee C. Romano & Leigh Raiford, eds. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 138.

between scholarly and public discourses in the United States is extreme,” claims Trouillot.¹⁹⁶ Public discourse in the U.S. typically takes place in the arena of the press. Therefore, Americans have handed the press undisputed authority to decide what is worth remembering. Explanations of the respective events in Kent and Jackson proffered by the media then become internalized by the American public and turned into collective memories. Thanks to media coverage, one need not have been at Kent or Jackson to know what transpired, even if this results in a misremembering. Considering questions of audience and examining the ways national media sources reported on the Jackson State shootings provides a window into the nation’s interpretation and subsequent memory of this event. How exactly did the media present the events at Jackson State to the public for consumption? And, how did this coverage begin to shape remembrance of the Jackson State shootings?

An analysis of the coverage of four different national news magazines helps to answer these questions. While *Time* and *Life* represent a sample of the dominant white press’ perspective of the separate shootings in Kent and Jackson, *Jet* and *Ebony* allow a generalized examination of the events from the viewpoint of the black press. However, a separate delineation must be made within these sources concerning how they achieve their rhetorical “authority.” Both *Time* and *Jet* rely on intellectually written pieces, often about politics, to establish their authority, whereas *Life* and *Ebony* establish cultural authority through the use of photo journalism. *Time* and *Jet* may have been able to scrutinize the events in both Kent and Jackson more extensively, but *Life*’s and *Ebony*’s reliance on the power of photography made their coverage more accessible. For the respective white and black media sources

¹⁹⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 152.

differences in audience go far beyond skin color. Although white and black Americans share the same history, their understanding of said history tends to be starkly different. White readers imagined the nation as the product of revolutionary ideals where “every man is created equal;” whereas black readers know better due to their history of subordination and they recognize the contradictions inherent in these democratic ideals. These divergent views of history cause white and black readers to access the same national memories, but in dissimilar ways, or to rely on wholly different national memories when determining what constitutes history. Therefore, white and black Americans hold conflicting opinions on which events are worth remembering and commemorating. Media coverage often reflects these unique opinions.

Juxtaposing the coverage of the Jackson State shootings and the Kent State shootings, it becomes clear that the white national print media did not afford the shootings in Mississippi the same consideration as those in Ohio with regard to amount, depth, tone, and context of coverage. In addition to simply not covering the deaths in Jackson as thoroughly as the events in Kent, the mainstream national white press implied by the language and context of its coverage that the deaths of Gibbs and Green did not matter as much as the killing of the four students at Kent State. Authors treated the carnage in Mississippi as a decidedly “Southern” problem, just the latest in a long line of racially motivated killings, while contrarily touting the “shocking” murder of four white students in Ohio as a national travesty closely tied to the decline of President Nixon. While African American media sources treated the two separate acts of violence more equitably, they had the same tendency to treat the violence in Jackson as an extension of the violence that characterized the

traditional phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Interestingly, the African American media also revealed the vein of Black Power rhetoric running through the story of the shootings in Mississippi, a movement that, at the time, the white press charged with squandering the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁹⁷

Not only did stories about Kent State far eclipse those afforded Jackson State from May 1970 to May 1973, but the depth of Jackson State's coverage also appears superficial when compared to Kent. In *Time* magazine, which circulates weekly, the Jackson State shootings garnered only one-third the amount of coverage that Kent State did.¹⁹⁸ With regard to the depth of coverage, *Time* again privileged the events at Kent State over those at Jackson State.¹⁹⁹ For example, of the two articles that reference Jackson State in the title, one of them treated the Jackson State shootings separately, while the other examined the deaths in Mississippi as an aside in connection with those in Ohio.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the killings at Jackson State appeared only five times as a main component of the article's story.²⁰¹ Treating the deaths in Jackson as a side note within stories about the Kent State shootings subordinated the events in Mississippi, offering the impression that they simply did not require further examination.²⁰² This lopsided coverage sent a clear message to the American

¹⁹⁷ Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past,"

¹⁹⁸ Jackson State surfaced in *Time* twenty-four times, whereas the Kent State shootings gained reference seventy-nine times.

¹⁹⁹ Jackson State appeared in the title of a *Time* article only twice, but Kent State surfaced by name in the title of eight news articles.

²⁰⁰ Peter Range, "Nation: I Expect More Jacksons," *Time*, June 1, 1970; and "Investigations: The Jackson-Kent Killings," *Time*, October 12, 1970. An examination of the remaining twenty-two articles where Jackson garners mention, but not deemed title worthy, yields a similar conclusion.

²⁰¹ "Nation: The South: Death in Two Cities," *Time*, May 25, 1970; and "Nation: Black Revival in the South," *Time*, June 1, 1970; and "The Law: Hotheads and Professionals," *Time*, August 10, 1970; and "Civil Rights: Advance and Retreat," *Time*, December 28, 1970; and "The Law: Lawmen on Trial," *Time*, April 3, 1972.

²⁰² In seventeen *Time* articles the events in Jackson did not acquire more than a sentence long blurb, and fifteen of these articles lumped Jackson State in with the Kent State shootings.

public regarding the relative importance of these two events. By covering the deaths at Kent more extensively than the ones at Jackson, the media implied that the loss of four young white people in Ohio should trouble the country more than the loss of two young black men in Mississippi.

A comparison of the respective coverage of the shootings in *Life*, a weekly photo-editorial magazine, returns even more staggering results. Although coverage of both Jackson and Kent seems exponentially less in *Life* than in *Time*, the ratio of Jackson to Kent articles appears considerably lower. *Life* ran stories concerning Jackson State a mere two times, but Kent State emerged in twenty stories, a tenfold disparity. Such a considerable discrepancy raises questions regarding *Life* magazine's target audience. While *Time* and *Life* both catered to a white audience, their different formats contributed to distinct niches within the market. *Time* positioned itself as more self-consciously "news" and reproduced that authority, whereas, *Life* posited itself as more cultural due to its reliance on photo journalism. Therefore, *Life*'s utilization of striking images, rather than more intellectually written news, made their content more accessible to a larger audience. With a larger audience comes a larger variety in the worldviews of readers. Editors likely deemed that given the ideological diversity of their readership, stories about the death of four white college students would interest a larger portion of their potential audience than stories about the similar death of two young black men. Extensive reporting on Jackson State proved more risky.

Of the two news stories in *Life* magazine where the Jackson State shootings earned acknowledgement, not only did neither of them include Jackson State in their titles, but they also completely failed to explain what had occurred in Mississippi. In "The Fifth Victim of

Kent State,” which spans four full pages, the author only allotted a sentence-long recognition of the loss of life in the Magnolia State.²⁰³ In the second article, the shootings at Jackson State attained another sentence-long reference, once again in the context of the events at Kent State.²⁰⁴ Not only did the deaths at Kent State acquire more in-depth coverage in *Life* magazine, but photos taken in the aftermath of the shootings at Kent State also graced the May 15, 1970 cover of the magazine, accompanied by an extensive photo-editorial in the issue.²⁰⁵ While *Life*'s coverage did not signify hard hitting journalism, their utilization of the power of photo put them in the position to make a greater impact in shaping the country's collective memory. Images generate a more immediate impression than the written word and in *Life*'s case, the images they published from the turmoil in Kent would become burned into the American consciousness and provide a collective reference point for a turbulent period in America's history.

Linguistically, articles discussing the Jackson State shootings signified that not only was the loss of life there not as catastrophic as that at Kent State, but also suggested that the event did not hold significant meaning for the country as a whole. As Renee Romano illustrates, with regard to the construction of memory of the 1963 Birmingham Church Bombing, the language used when recounting a loss of life speaks volumes to how the event becomes remembered. Language can convey the seriousness of the killing or perhaps place the victims' character in context.²⁰⁶ For example, the use of the word “murder” to describe

²⁰³ Robert G. Hummerstone, “The Fifth Victim of Kent State,” *Life*, October 16, 1970.

²⁰⁴ Gene Farmer, “How Apollo 11 Changed Three Famous Men,” *Life*, July 17, 1970.

²⁰⁵ “Kent State: Four Deaths at Noon,” *Life*, May 15, 1970.

²⁰⁶ Renee C. Romano, “Narratives of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, 102-107.

what had happened in Mississippi would convey a sense that the police officers acted in malice and used unwarranted violence against the innocent students.

Apparently, the mainstream national media appeared unwilling to label events in Jackson as murder, but seemed willing to go that far, and even farther, in their assessment of what occurred in Kent. In *Time*'s discussion of the Jackson State shootings, the events in Mississippi only receive the moniker "murder" when scrutinized simultaneously with the Kent State shootings. When news writers treated Jackson separately, they seemed reluctant to even label the Jackson events as "killings," referring to them simply as "shootings." In so doing, the author essentially erased the sense that people had perished, since most readers would know that one can be shot and not die. Moreover, the reluctance to refer to the Jackson State shootings as murder developed in contrast to the strong language used to describe the Kent State shootings. *Time*'s article, "Kent State: Martyrdom That Shook the Country," provides perhaps the greatest example of this discrepancy; not only do the authors refer to what happened at Kent as "a bloodstained symbol of the rising student rebellion against the Nixon Administration and the war in Southeast Asia," they permanently establish what happened at Kent as "martyrdom."²⁰⁷ Support for President Nixon and the war in Vietnam had reached dangerously low levels in the aftermath of his announcement of the invasion of Cambodia and the deaths in Kent. Outspoken conscientious objectors slowly shed the stigma of being a disorderly nuisance and began to constitute an ever growing segment of the population. Having martyrdom emblazoned on the title of the story suggested to the reader that the students in Kent met an unjust demise, fighting for a moral cause that transcended

²⁰⁷ "Nation: Kent State: Martyrdom That Shook the Country," *Time*, May 18, 1970.

law and order. In a religious country such as ours, the use of the word martyrdom implies the downfall of saints and holds significant power.

Language used in the titles of *Time* articles conveyed to readers that the drama in Kent should alarm the entire country, whereas the deaths in Jackson resulted from racially-based violence that has traditionally been confined to the South. The same article that described the Kent State shootings as martyrdom also asserted in its title that the events “Shook the Country,” thereby granting Kent State national import.”²⁰⁸ However, the “nation” *Time* imagines is all white, and the death of white children is inherently more tragic. Thus, the linguistic maneuver here reflects and reinforces the dominance of the white body politic and the primacy of white national memory.

Conversely, the titles of articles about the Jackson State shootings re-inscribe an alternative perspective that assigns it mere regional significance. Three *Time* articles, which subject the Jackson State shootings to a relatively thorough analysis, incorporate the word “South” prominently into the title.²⁰⁹ This rhetoric of southern distinctiveness functions vis-à-vis the white-on-black violence that prevailed during the Civil Rights Movement.

According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South...the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminished the movement,” explaining, “the trope of the South as the nation’s ‘opposite other,’ an image that southernizes racism and shields from scrutiny both the economic dimension of southern white supremacy and the institutionalized patterns of exploitation, segregation, and discrimination in other regions of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ “Nation: The South: Death in Two Cities.”; and “Nation: Black Revival in the South.”; and “Races: A Southern Tragedy.”

the country—patterns that survived the civil rights movement.”²¹⁰ By 1970, the nation had a well-established mediated view of Mississippi as “another country,” characterized by exceptional violence and un-American ideals. According to Joseph Crespino, “Mississippi has served as an icon for southern intransigence, the key setting for what has become the modern American melodrama in which the nation dealt with anomalous Deep South racism and made good on its promise of equality for all its citizens”²¹¹ Thus, by depicting the deaths in Jackson as a southern tragedy, the authors fixed them in national memory as the result of a vestige of the Southern racism left over after the awakening that was the civil rights era. This excused Americans in the rest of the country from shouldering blame. Nevertheless, Crespino states that the nationwide urban unrest of the mid-to-late 1960s revealed that Mississippi was not “an exception to American moral decency,” but rather “America writ small.” Mississippi’s “otherness” was far more representative of the rest of the country than most Americans—both at the time and since—are willing to admit.²¹²

Life’s language follows a similar trajectory and implicitly incorporates a distinction between nonviolent civil disobedience and Black Power. Its cover story, “Kent State: Four Deaths at Noon,” characterizes the events at Kent as “senseless and brutal murder,” calling one of the students slain while protesting an individual who “stood up for what he believed and he didn’t believe in violence.”²¹³ Implicit in this invocation of nonviolent civil disobedience was a distinction between the Kent and Jackson protesters, as well as between civil disobedience and Black Power. *Life*’s coverage exemplified the opinion propagated by

²¹⁰ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past,” 1234, 1239.

²¹¹ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 4.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹³ “Kent State: Four Deaths at Noon,” *Life*, May 15, 1970.

the media that the students at Kent State got gunned down for expressing their distaste for Nixon's morally questionable decision to invade Cambodia. Although the students at Jackson State readily stated that the uprising on their campus also stemmed from the Nixon administration's course of action in Southeast Asia, including the disproportionate drafting of African Americans, the picture painted by the media does not convey the moral aspect of the protests at Jackson because of its Black Power component.²¹⁴ To the extent that the Jackson State students embraced Black Power, and therefore eschewed nonviolence, they, as victims, could not claim innocence and may have actually "deserved" their fate. Media sources often neglected to mention the anti-Vietnam aspect of the demonstrations at Jackson State because the students framed their disagreement in decidedly racial terms. African American students drew a parallel between the subjugation of the Vietnamese people with the discrimination they faced at home, a key tactic of the Black Power Movement. Acknowledging the anti-Vietnam argument of the African American students in Mississippi would mean that the media would thereby have to recognize the continued prevalence of systematic racism in American domestic and foreign policy.

As already stated above, the depth of coverage of the Jackson shootings in *Life* hardly compared to that of Kent, but in referring to the report released by the President's Commission on Campus Unrest, or the Scranton Commission, *Life*'s coverage adds credence by citing the findings of the government's investigation. By way of explaining the events in Jackson, one *Life* article states, "Earlier, in a separate report [from the one about Kent State] the commission had bluntly blamed the death of two young blacks at Jackson State College

²¹⁴ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 30-32.

in Mississippi on ‘racial animosity’ on the part of the white police.”²¹⁵ Not only does this statement revoke any sense of agency or humanism from the victims of Jackson State, it also reaffirmed the notion that violence doled out by Southern whites, afflicted with individual racism, constituted business as usual. However, as a “factual” source, the Commission’s report incorporates its own collection of inclusions and exclusions, communicating its perspective on the shootings in Jackson. The federal government’s published report constitutes a particularly authoritative voice in history production, thus the report’s contents represent a formal interpretation of events. Much like media reports, the Commission’s report merged the first three steps in Trouillot’s historical production process, thereby circumventing the factor of time and limiting the opportunity for moments of significant reflection. Those accessing the report as a means of reconstructing this moment in history would receive a clear message concerning the respective shootings. A mere glance at the published report indicates the Commission’s stance regarding the relative importance of the Jackson State shootings in comparison to the ones in Kent: its authors devoted 178 pages to Kent and fifty-five to Jackson.²¹⁶ Thus, the federal government itself sanctioned the view that the Kent State shootings had lasting implications for study, whereas the Jackson State shootings mattered less—a view that would subsequently be written into the history of the time period.

Moreover, the white press inadvertently revealed its bias against Black Power in its placement of Jackson State coverage. For example, in *Time*’s “The South: Death in Two Cities,” the Jackson State shootings emerge in comparison to the deaths which took place

²¹⁵ “The Fifth Victim of Kent State.”

²¹⁶ *The Report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest*, 233-410, 411-465.

“amid an orgy of burning and looting” in Augusta, Georgia on May 11, 1970. By comparing the students at Jackson State to looters killed during the “race riot” in Augusta, the story indicated that neither the victims in Jackson nor Georgia could claim innocence. In addition, this news article acknowledged that Americans had a harder time sustaining outrage over killing of the black victims, because “somehow violence against blacks, especially in the South, has a familiar ring.”²¹⁷ In the story “Civil Rights: Advance and Retreat,” *Time* placed the killings at Jackson State within the framework of the continuing struggle for civil rights by African Americans. Despite the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest’s deeming the killing of two Jackson State students by white police unnecessary, the article reminded readers that a jury in Mississippi remained unable to hold these officers accountable for their crimes.²¹⁸ The white press’ tendency to examine the Jackson State shootings in relation to questions of race and race relations in the South conveyed a sense that individual, not systematic, racism was the root of the problem.

On the other hand, Kent State most often emerged in association with discussions of politics, including assessments of the Nixon administration and the status of the war in Vietnam. National print media sources illustrated the view that the Kent State shootings had an irreversible effect on the Nixon administration, including the way in which the public viewed its course of action in Vietnam. In “At War with War,” the author states, “Both the eruption of protest and the reaction to it mocked Nixon's still unfulfilled promise to lead the nation ‘forward together.’”²¹⁹ Not only did the stories in *Time* offer the impression that the Kent State shootings did lasting damage to the public image of the Nixon administration, it

²¹⁷ “Nation: The South: Death in Two Cities.”

²¹⁸ “Civil Rights: Advance and Retreat,” *Time*, December 28, 1970.

²¹⁹ “Nation: At War with War,” *Time*, May 18, 1970.

also exhibited the extent to which the shootings caused the government to second guess its choice to invade Cambodia, the event that had initially sparked the protests. Backed up by interviews with government officials, the author of “Nixon’s Campaign for Confidence,” states that the president would never again undertake a maneuver similar to the invasion of Cambodia without first getting approval from Congress.²²⁰ Considering that coverage of Kent State maintained that the shootings had lasting implications for the how our government would conduct foreign relations in the future, it remains no wonder that they became a part of America’s collective memory. But, the Jackson State students *also* had a foreign policy critique. However, because they explicitly linked their analyses to white supremacy’s role in foreign policy and Black Power’s anti-colonial criticisms, their protests remained at the margins.

Coverage of the Jackson State shootings in *Life* remained sparse, making generalizations about the context of coverage difficult to formulate. However, the two articles in which Jackson gained nominal mention did not lend themselves to establishing the importance of the event. In the article, “How Apollo 11 Changed Three Famous Men,” Buzz Aldrin, one of the first men to land on the moon, recounted to journalist Gene Farmer how the killings in Jackson and Kent prompted him to start an organization to help young people air their grievances without the use of protest. However, Farmer never explicates why the killings bothered Aldrin so much.²²¹ Interestingly, the second article that mentioned Jackson also expounded on the idea of resisting the urge to participate in protest. Dean Kahler, a Kent State student who became paralyzed from the waist down after being wounded during the

²²⁰ “Nation: Nixon’s Campaign For Confidence,” *Time*, May 25, 1970.

²²¹ Farmer, “How Apollo 11 Changed Three Famous Men.”

May 4, 1970 shootings, states that non-violent mediation offered the only way to avoid protest-induced tragedies, like that at Kent.²²² Although the two articles did mention Jackson State as a mere side note to the events in Ohio, they erased the implicit Black Power argument of the Mississippi students by rhetorically reasserting the primacy of “nonviolent” civil rights strategies. Of course, the “success” of nonviolent mediation depended upon violent responses to peaceful protesters.

Life's coverage of Kent State revealed the deep divisions that had emerged within our society concerning law and order, lending itself to a nationwide discourse that helped spread knowledge of the event. An examination of these articles demonstrates that not all Americans had a sympathetic reaction to the deaths in Ohio. While the cover story, ““Kent State: Four Deaths at Noon,”” reflected the outrage that many Americans felt regarding the loss of life at Kent, the reaction letters sent by Americans to the editor worked to contradict it.²²³ In response to this cover story, one man railed against *Life's* use of the words “senseless and brutal murder” to describe what happened at Kent State.²²⁴ Similarly, a woman replied to this letter to the editor by claiming, “How refreshing to see that there are others who believe that lawlessness should be punished—not condoned for the sake of freedom!”²²⁵ This condemnation of lawlessness in reference to Kent calls attention to a rupture that had been occurring in America’s dialogue concerning law and order. Historically, charges of “lawlessness” targeted African Americans who refused to assent to laws they found unjust. However, as anti-Vietnam protests resounded throughout the country, dissident white

²²² Hummerstone, “The Fifth Victim of Kent State.”

²²³ “Kent State: Four Deaths at Noon.”

²²⁴ “Letter to the Editor: Kent State,” *Life*, June 5, 1970.

²²⁵ “Letters to the Editor: Kent State Letters,” *Life*, June 26, 1970.

Americans also became a threat to the “American Dream” in the eyes of their fellow countrymen. Nixon capitalized on this rupture. As conservative white Americans mourned for the “good old days” before civil rights, Black Power, and the Vietnam quagmire, Nixon had employed their nostalgia by making a return to law and order a central theme of his 1968 run for president. During his 1968 speech accepting the Republican nomination for president he highlighted this desperate need for law and order:

When the nation with the greatest tradition of the rule of law is plagued by unprecedented lawlessness; And when the President of the United States cannot travel abroad or to any major city at home without fear of a hostile demonstration -- then it's time for new leadership for the United States of America...The American Revolution was and is dedicated to progress, but our founders recognized that the first requisite of progress is order. Now, there is no quarrel between progress and order -- because neither can exist without the other. So let us have order in America...

Nixon promised the “great majority of Americans” a return to order, and in return, they made him president.²²⁶

In keeping with his campaign promise to restore law and order, a crusade against dissent became a defining feature of the Nixon’s administration. On November 3, 1969, Nixon made an address to the nation, in which he pleaded with the “Silent Majority” of Americans, asking them to continue putting their confidence in the American government. Nixon argued that these “honest, patriotic” citizens were the ones who truly held the power in American society and declared that they desperately needed to reassert themselves. Maintenance of law and order was now the duty of all Americans. While Nixon vowed to

²²⁶ Richard Nixon, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention,” August 8, 1968, Miami Beach, FL, Papers of President Richard Nixon, The American Presidency Project Document Archive, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25968&st=law+and+order&st1=#ixzz1lktWDtTM> (accessed February 4, 2012).

help this cause by not letting the “policy of this nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the nation by mounting demonstrations in the street,” he urged that mainstream society must do their part to counter dissent.²²⁷

The Jackson State shootings enjoyed more equitable coverage in the national African American print media, as indicated by an examination of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. Despite the fact that the mainstream white press did not cover the events at Jackson State to the extent it did Kent, the national black press treated them relatively equally. From May 1970 to May 1973, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines published a combined thirty-one stories concerning the shootings at Jackson State and twenty-six stories mentioning Kent State. Depth-wise, the Jackson State shootings also enjoyed far more comprehensive coverage in the African American press than the white mainstream print media. While never featured on a cover of either magazine, the Jackson State deaths earned an eight page spread in the June 4, 1970 issue of *Jet*.²²⁸ However, as W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues, due to their subordinate position in society and lack of power to decide the relative importance of events, “African American created their own understanding of the past, but whereas white memory filled public spaces and made universal claims, the black countermemory was either ignored by whites or was largely invisible to them.”²²⁹ While the black community deemed events in Jackson important and made it an integral part of their understanding of past, those who had the most power to shape national memory could still disregard it.

²²⁷ Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, Washington D.C., Papers of President Richard Nixon, The American Presidency Project Document Archive, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2303&st=Silent+Majority&st1=#ixzz1lkJyHsxN> (accessed January 31, 2012).

²²⁸ Theophilus Green, “What’s Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss,” *Jet*, June 4, 1970.

²²⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.

Interestingly, the Kent State shootings also acquired their own news stories in the African American press, a reciprocity that did not occur in the white mainstream print media. As a matter of fact, of the twenty-five stories about Jackson State which appeared in *Jet*, nearly half of them mentioned the Kent State shootings in some manner.²³⁰ Kent State even obtained its own news stories in the black print media.²³¹ Details regarding what occurred in Kent, Ohio, enjoyed circulation in both the white community, via the dominant media, and in the African American community's national media outlets, thereby explaining why the Kent State shooting became well-known throughout the nation as a whole.

Language usage in the African American press appears stronger across the board, routinely invoking the word murder to criticize the actions of law enforcement in both Ohio and Mississippi. Although both *Jet* and *Ebony* implied that the black community felt more outrage over the shooting of the two students in Jackson, they still conveyed the sense of anger that African Americans experienced due to the deaths at Kent State. *Ebony*'s photo-editorial about the Jackson State shootings closes with the moving statement, "Citizens of this nation, whether white or black, should no longer be subject to legal murder by the police

²³⁰ "Black College Presidents Tell Nixon of Repression Fears," *Jet*, June 4, 1970; and Green, "What's Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss.," and "SCLC Marches; Declares Active Political War," *Jet*, June 11, 1970; and "Son of Ex-Globe-Trotter Heads Univ. Student Body," *Jet*, June 11, 1970; and "Student Leader Refers to Miss. Patrolmen as 'Animals,'" *Jet*, July 2, 1970; and Theophilus Green, "Black Leader of White Majority to Lead Summer 'Peace Train Project' For Student Movement," *Jet*, July 9, 1970; and "Youth on President's Commission Forms Own Group," *Jet*, August 27, 1970; and "Calm, Solemnity Prevail on Jackson State Campus One Year After Killings," *Jet*, June 10, 1971; and "Seeks Kent, Jackson Memorials in Chicago," *Jet*, June 10, 1971; and "Official Panel Confirms Black Panel's Findings in Deaths of S.U. Students," *Jet*, January 4, 1973.

²³¹ Eleven *Jet* stories cover the events in Ohio separately from those in Jackson. "Whites React to Kent Killings; Blacks Ignored," *Jet*, May 21, 1970; and "Jane Fonda Arrested with Pro-Seale Handbills," *Jet*, May 28, 1970; and "Resourceful," *Jet*, May 28, 1970; and "Ticker Tape U.S.A.," *Jet*, June 4, 1970; and "Black Artists Hold Confab; What Black Public Wants," *Jet*, June 11, 1970; and "Frederick Douglass Kin Explains Black July 4th Boycott," *Jet*, July 23, 1970; and "Says Unrest Panel Must Deal with Agnew's Remarks," *Jet*, September 10, 1970; and "Urban League Official Gets Post at Kent State," *Jet*, September 24, 1970; and "Quietness on Campuses is Called 'Chilling,'" *Jet*, November 12, 1970; and "Angry Burial for 'Soledad' Jackson in Small Illinois Town," *Jet*, September 16, 1971; and "Words of the Week," *Jet*, November 25, 1971.

and the military. The reckless use of guns against innocent citizens leads us just that much closer to a police state.”²³² The author of the story concedes that none of the students killed in May 1970, regardless of race, deserved the treatment they received at the hands of the forces meant to protect them. In this plea for compassion, the African American press followed in a long tradition in their community of using white bodies as a means of gaining attention for the systematic violence against black people and the need for equality in the United States. Perhaps the greatest example of this occurred in 1964 during SNCC’s Freedom Summer, when civil rights organizers used white college students as volunteers in Mississippi hoping to gain attention for the deplorable racial conditions in the state. Their plan revealed the value of white bodies after the murder of two white volunteers horrified the nation.²³³

Yet like the mainstream white press, black media outlets also fell into the trap of silencing the Jackson State protesters’ anti-Vietnam stance. *Jet*’s largest post-Jackson news story actually denied the war’s connection to the students’ protests. The author writes, “the deaths had little or no connection with the nation-wide campus protest movement, the war in southeast Asia or reaction to the killing of four students at Kent State.” He continues, “Community leaders view the shootings as entirely racially predicated, the latest in a series of racial killings by white authorities.”²³⁴ Both the author of the piece and the community leaders he refers to may have truly believed that the basis of the tragedy in Jackson revolved around race. Publicly distancing the African American community from anti-war sentiments may have also represented an attempt to avoid severing the alliance with white liberals who supported Nixon’s course of action in Southeast Asia. Regardless, by circulating this

²³² “Law and Disorder,” *Ebony*, July 1970.

²³³ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 86-99.

²³⁴ Green, “What’s Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss.”

viewpoint in the media the black press helped segregate the Jackson State shootings from broader foreign policy concerns.

Moreover, foregrounding the Jackson State shootings strictly in the context of race, the black press allowed the nation at large to associate them with a longer history of African American deaths at the hands of law enforcement. This caused readers to relate the Jackson State shootings to race relations in the Jim Crow South, and, ironically perhaps, consigned Gibbs and Green to historical anonymity. In other words, these two young black men joined countless others who had lost their lives at the hands of lynch mobs or white police—those whose names history rarely remembers. With a long history of racialized violence in the South, the Jackson State shootings proved less shocking.

Various *Jet* articles fully acknowledged that the race of the victims would render what happened in Jackson seemingly unimportant in the eyes of American society when compared to Kent. In an eight page spread titled, “What’s Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss.,” a Jackson State student claimed, “I think it was preplanned. They [Mississippi State Highway Patrol] came up here [Jackson State’s campus] with the idea of killing.” Going further, the article states that racism appeared the primary motivation for the barrage of gunfire, and that the officers cared so little for the lives of the black students that they took time to collect their spent cartridges from the road before checking on the injured. The officers’ decision to tamper with the scene by removing evidence signaled their complete failure to recognize their actions as homicide.²³⁵ This vein of thinking ran through multiple articles published in *Jet*. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. claimed that he

²³⁵ Green, “What’s Behind the Killing of Black Students in Miss.”

thought the Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiry into the case was a sham and that they had engaged in a conspiracy with the state troopers around the country to systematically wipe out African Americans.²³⁶ Theories such as these, which had both historical salience and ties to Black Power discourse, were shunned by the nation at large and subsequently led to a backlash against claims of police brutality. White and blacks alike looked upon Black Power with a wary eye, and as historian Peniel Joseph states, in historical reconstructions "Black Power most often serves as a twisted folklore, a cautionary tale featuring gun-toting militants who practiced politics without portfolio...and who dragged down the more promising movements for social justice."²³⁷ Only in recent years have historians attempted to interrogate this negative portrayal of Black Power and combat its exclusion from studies of the civil right struggle.

Although the shootings at Kent State also earned a racialized analysis in *Jet*, these revolved around laboring to prove that because the victims were white the event gained more prominence in the media. A perfect instance, the article "Whites React to Kent Killings; Blacks Ignored," contrasts the outrage felt by society concerning Kent State, with the seeming indifference felt by white Americans with regard to the similar loss of African American life. The killing of three black South Carolina State University students in Orangeburg, South Carolina in 1968 became a way to underscore this point. Dr. M. Maceo Nance, President of South Carolina State University, remarked that African Americans should pay particular attention to the outcome of the case against the National Guard who fired the shots at Kent State, claiming that if they were convicted, and the state troopers in

²³⁶ "'Go Without Food, Buy Guns': Powell Tells Blacks," *Jet*, June 11, 1970.

²³⁷ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 302.

Orangeburg were not, it would further prove the racism inherent in the country's justice system.²³⁸ Therefore, the coverage of both the Jackson State and Kent State shootings in *Jet* directly challenged the disparity between how society reacted to these two events.

Ebony followed suit with *Jet* in its analysis of the Jackson State shootings by looking at the event through the eyes of an enraged African American community. Perhaps the greatest example of this frustration occurred in the photo-editorial, "Law and Disorder." Playing on Nixon's law and order rhetoric, *Ebony* highlighted the irony of law and order discourse being directed at white Americans. The story, accompanied by a full, page-sized image of the bullet-sprayed Alexander Hall, claimed that had the violence at Kent State not happened, the Jackson shootings likely would not have earned any national media coverage at all, as had been the case with the 1968 shootings in South Carolina.²³⁹ While claims of lawlessness had traditionally been reserved for African Americans, it was the tragic attempt to quash lawlessness among the white students in Kent that gained Jackson State the modicum of attention it received.

Two other articles in *Ebony* attempted to further reveal the racial injustices inherent in America at a time when national rhetoric proclaimed that the goals of the Civil Rights Movement had been achieved. In a discussion of the inability for Southern blacks to obtain justice within the system, Kenneth Tollett claimed that the battle for justice remained especially difficult in cases where the victims were black college students. He attributes this societal bias against African American students to their visibility during the Civil Rights

²³⁸ "Whites React to Kent Killings; Blacks Ignored."

²³⁹ "Law and Disorder."

Movement.²⁴⁰ Leaders of the black community also used the Jackson State shootings to explain that the nonviolence advocated during the traditional Civil Rights Movement had not worked, thereby forcing students to turn their attention toward the ideology of Black Power to achieve their aims.²⁴¹ As Tim Tyson contends, early journalistic accounts began “portraying Black Power as a ‘new black mood’ or a ‘radical response to white America’—a black backlash to the betrayals of white liberals and the assaults of white reactionaries.”²⁴² *Ebony*’s story about the proliferation of black revolutionary feelings following the Jackson State shootings reflects the same interpretation of Black Power in the national media.

Although the coverage of Kent State in *Ebony* often appeared side-by-side with that of Jackson State, in one instance the Kent State shootings gained separate treatment. Interestingly, the article considers the Attica prison riot of 1971 and how this event would be remembered. At the opening of the story, written in the immediate aftermath of the riot, the author states, “The name ‘Attica’ has become a part of the American language now. It takes its place along with My Lai, Emmitt Till, Kent State, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. . . . Attica has become a part of the language of violence in the United States of America.”²⁴³ The name Jackson State remained absent from this list recounting violent loss of life. Even more shocking, this omission occurred in an African American magazine. The failure to link the inherent racism at the heart of American judicial system revealed by both Jackson State and Attica represents a missed opportunity, one that would have helped cement Jackson State in the national memory. Making this connection explicit would have also worked to undermine

²⁴⁰ Kenneth S. Tollett, “Southern Justice for Blacks,” *Ebony*, October 1971.

²⁴¹ James Boggs, “Black Revolutionary Power,” *Ebony*, August 1970.

²⁴² Tim Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 543.

²⁴³ “Of Life and Death,” *Ebony*, November 1971.

the dismissal of Jackson State as a regional event because Attica prison is in New York.

Finally, this *Ebony* writer also mentioned the My Lai massacre as significant while simultaneously silencing the relationship between the Jackson State protests and Vietnam.

Overall, coverage of the Jackson State shootings in both the white mainstream and African American press perpetrated a number of conclusions concerning the events, which ultimately contributed to the overall silencing of the deaths in Mississippi. Rather than examining the systematic discrimination that underpinned the killing of the two students in Jackson, the media blamed the personal racist convictions of the police officers who did the shooting. On the other hand, at Kent, where white National Guard troops fired upon white students, the question of who was to blame revealed an undercurrent of conflict running through the whole of American society. Furthermore, the tone of the protests in Jackson and the decidedly Black Power-tinged response to the deaths that resulted allowed the media to intertwine the shootings with a new revolutionary mood within the black community that appeared wholly different than the cautious optimism of the Civil Rights Movement.

Since 1970, historians have utilized the “facts” created in the aftermath of the Jackson State shootings to create reconstructions of the events in Mississippi, highlighting certain aspects of the happenings, while silencing others. As Trouillot points out, in historical narratives and formal histories these allusions and silences remain rife with questions of power.²⁴⁴ In the United States, those individuals with the power to dictate the production of history, namely the media and the government, have an investment in ensuring that the resulting narrative embraces an image of America as a beacon of progress and democracy.

²⁴⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 53-58.

This works even in shocking moments that challenge such an image. By using the Kent State shootings as the iconic figurehead of Vietnam War Era protests, those who guide history can construct the war as a momentary lapse in moral judgment on the part of the American government, rather than as the latest conflict in a long history of imperial domination of the colored races, as the students in Jackson claimed. Therefore, the coverage of the respective shootings actually ended up reinforcing the positive image of American democracy. Media accounts portrayed the events as Kent State as a wakeup call to America, clearing the moral fog caused by Vietnam. Jackson State, on the other hand, stood as an example of the individual racism that continued to plague Mississippi, a Deep South state that constituted “another country” due to its failure to embrace “true” American ideals.

Despite clear ties to Southern racial conflict, Jackson State also frequently appears absent from narratives concerning the struggle for African American civil rights, due to its timing and connection to the Black Power Movement. As Hall points out, dominant narratives of the Civil Rights Movement begin in 1954 with the *Brown* case and culminate in the mid-1960s with the passage of the Voting Rights of 1964 and Civil Rights Act of 1965. According to this chronology, everything that followed the movement’s “victory,” including the advent of Black Power, actually reflected its decline.²⁴⁵ Historian Glenn Eskew has coined the term “Won Cause” to characterize narratives of the Civil Rights Movement that completely ignore the Black Power Movement and the positive contributions it made to the continued struggle for racial justice.²⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the Jackson State shootings reveal the continued inequality that survived the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement and

²⁴⁵ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past,” 1234, 1254.

²⁴⁶ Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, 28.

fly in the face of the “Won Cause” narrative. The maintenance of the “Won Cause” demands that the shootings in Jackson be omitted from history.

Nevertheless, in recent years historians have taken up the task of rescuing the post-civil rights period from the margins of history. While historical scholarship concerning Black Power has increased, Joseph asserts that future Black Power studies must examine how the Black Power Movement transformed American democracy through its antiwar activism, its preoccupation with decolonization, and its attempts at foreign policy intervention.²⁴⁷ Jackson State stands at the nexus of all these, and more. Only when this story is incorporated into the national memory can we fully understand what happened in May 1970.

²⁴⁷Peniel Joseph, “Historians and the Black Power Movement,” *OAH Magazine of History* 22 (July 2008): 9-14.

CONCLUSION

Remembering Jackson State

While historians continue to devote themselves to the unearthing of a Black Power narrative that highlights the contributions and complexity of the movement, the glaring dichotomy between nonviolence and Black Power persists in America's collective memory. Kent State remains unchallenged as the prime example of Vietnam Era protest, the Jackson State shootings remain absent from the conversation, and memories of Black Power still frame its impact as negative.

In a 2012 oral history interview, Judy Tompkins, a white law school student at the University of Virginia from 1969-1972, underscored the perseverance of such narratives. When prompted to speak about events that stuck out in her mind from this period, she invoked the memory of Kent State:

Kent State was the perfect example of things that got out of control very, very quickly... There was no excuse as far as I'm concerned for Kent State, except that they [the National Guardsmen] were badly trained. But I mean, so you've got a bunch of spring crazy students, you're going to shoot them all? Please. Does that stop everything [the protests]? No, it just makes it worse.

Not once in the conversation did Tompkins mention the similar shootings in Jackson.

However, when questioned about her feelings toward the growing tide of Black Power during the late 1960s she maintained,

...it [activism] was a good thing up to the point of nonviolence. That's where I always drew the line...I had no use for violence in the name of anything, because I just simply do not believe that violence creates a positive response. I think it creates

an incredibly negative response, and it doesn't help. ... the fabric of society is not going to hold together as long as violence is the response... And that's why, you know, I was so enamored of Martin Luther King and what he did.²⁴⁸

This personal narrative portrays Kent State as a pointless waste of life while depicting Black Power as a calculated mistake that only perpetrated further violence and the “unraveling” of the country’s moral fiber. The duality of nonviolence versus Black Power takes center stage and Martin Luther King Jr. takes on a super human quality. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall asserts that “Martin Luther King Jr. is this [traditional] narrative’s defining figure—frozen in 1963, proclaiming ‘I have a dream’ during the march on the Mall.”²⁴⁹ King’s illustrious moral superiority stands in stark contrast to Black Power, which, as Peniel Joseph maintains, is often cast in the story as “the ‘evil twin’ that wrecked civil rights.”²⁵⁰ However, as this work shows, the supposed dichotomous relationship between the civil rights struggles of King and Black Power cannot hold. King’s 1967 speech at Riverside Church illustrates that he, like his Black Power contemporaries, could not ignore the racial implications of Vietnam Era American foreign policy. Students at Jackson State shared this concern and, as the war in Southeast Asia escalated in the spring of 1970, expressed themselves the best way they knew how: protest.

Rather than signifying separate sides of a duality, civil rights and Black Power share a common history and goals, as demonstrated by historians such as Joseph, Tim Tyson, and Hassan Jeffries.²⁵¹ Mississippi provided the ideal background for this mutual struggle against

²⁴⁸ Judy Tompkins, interview by author, Durham, N.C., February 7, 2012 (in author’s possession).

²⁴⁹ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past,” 1234.

²⁵⁰ Peniel Joseph, “Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement.” *The Black Scholar* 31 (Fall/Winter 2001): 2.

²⁵¹ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*; and Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*; and Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*.

white supremacy. African American activists during the classical phase of the movement recognized that the Magnolia State represented ground zero for combating their political, social, and economic marginalization. Through dramatic events, such as the unrest that accompanied Meredith's attempt to integrate Ole Miss, the American public witnessed firsthand the depth of Mississippi's prejudice. Yet they also imagined Mississippi as "another country," tucked away in a corner of the Deep South. As later events would demonstrate, white supremacy was not exclusive to the South. Despite activists' dedication to the freedom struggle in Mississippi, white Mississippians held steadfastly to their control of the state beyond the 1960s. It is this part of the story that traditional "Won Cause" narratives often omit.²⁵²

For white Mississippians, federally mandated equality embodied the destruction of their way of life. No longer could they claim Mississippi as solely their own. A backlash against civil rights followed as panicked whites attempted to turn back the clock. Relying on the gendered discourse that had served as a rallying cry since Reconstruction, white Mississippians garnered support from their contemporaries by characterizing political, economic, and social equality for African Americans as a threat to the American, i.e. white, way of life. For example, a pamphlet propounding the "principles" of the KKK in Mississippi declares, "We believe in the protection of our pure womanhood, the home, the church, our public school system, our Constitution, and our American way of life."²⁵³ Through a time tested combination of economic reprisals and intimidation, organization such as the WCC

²⁵² Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 4-17; and Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, 28.

²⁵³ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 119-131; and "Recruitment Flyer," Ku Klux Klan Records, 1960s-1970s, Collection #04921, Folder 2, UNCSHC.

and KKK effectively prevented many African Americans from claiming the rights promised to them under the new federal legislation. Where more subtle techniques failed, outright violence prevailed. African Americans in Mississippi continued to suffer from white-on-black violence well into the late 1960s. However, this violence was not met with the same national outrage produced by displays of violence during the classical phase of the movement. The quagmire of the Vietnam War and the devolution of race relations in regions outside of the South, as evidenced by the urban rebellions of the last half of the decade, meant that Americans had competing concerns.

While the passage of civil rights legislation symbolized an overwhelming victory in the struggle for equality, these remote edicts of the government in Washington D.C. did little to improve the everyday lives of African Americans in Mississippi. As Crespino demonstrates, political leaders in the state devised a plan that combined outward compliance with new less direct methods of discrimination. The battle over school integration waged on, with the establishment of intelligence testing and the “freedom of choice” movement replacing outright segregation.²⁵⁴

Moreover, despite the explicit intent of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the fact that twenty-two African Americans won election in local and state offices two years later, black Mississippians still faced challenges when attempting to wield the power of the ballot.²⁵⁵ Seemingly innocuous actions undertaken by the state government, such as the redrawing of district lines, the changing of government positions from elected to appointed, and the increasing of qualifications for holding public office, aimed to keep African Americans

²⁵⁴ Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 4, 173-204.

²⁵⁵ Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 331.

politically impotent.²⁵⁶ This new round of disfranchisement strategies prompted some activists to initiate grassroots movements that focused on independent African American political organizing. Stokely Carmichael undertook this task in Lowndes County, Alabama, creating an all-black political party that, according to Jeffries, signified a revolution of sorts.²⁵⁷ More broadly, the promise of federal legislation, when coupled with its failure to produce substantive change, led many African Americans to the conclusion that a comprehensive change in strategy was needed.

Black Power, the movement articulated by Carmichael in 1966, proclaimed that in order to combat their continued discrimination African Americans needed to sever alliances with white liberals, whose personal and political interests often conflicted with their own. One point of contention for Black Power activists was white liberals' decision to support American foreign policy concerning the war in Southeast Asia. According to proponents of Black Power, white liberals could not simultaneously claim to support civil rights for African Americans at home while condoning the subjugation of another colored race on the other side of the globe. In the eyes of many African Americans, the Vietnam War represented the latest episode in America's history of imperialistic conquests. The reframing of the national freedom movement in relation to global anti-colonial struggles, wherein African Americans themselves are repositioned as colonial subjects, signifies one of the many complex aspects of the Black Power Movement that remain excluded from traditional treatments of the civil rights era.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 1-13.

²⁵⁷ Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 1-6.

²⁵⁸ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 2-32, 77-81.

Students at Jackson State latched on to Black Power's argument against the Vietnam War, a military conflict that, in their opinion, forcibly pitted the colored races against one another. The U.S. government drafted young African American men in disproportionate numbers and forced them to go overseas and fight people who, in the words of Henry Thompson, "never called us 'niggers' before."²⁵⁹ By describing the war as a byproduct of white supremacy, protesting Jackson State students united local, national, and international concerns. If Vietnam and the Kent State shootings prompted students to protest, they directed their anger at the symbols of white supremacy in their immediate environment, such as white motorists traveling down Lynch Street on the way to the outlying suburbs. Joy Ann Williamson shows that black college students' decision to organize at the local level during the Black Power Era complemented their goal of increased autonomy for African Americans.²⁶⁰ However, the students' demonstrations appear random and undirected to observers examining the protests outside of this Black Power framework. This interpretation of the protests has traditionally caused those studying the events in Jackson to debate which provoked the students more, racism or Vietnam. But as this work has demonstrated, these concerns coexisted in the minds of students, with Black Power providing the theoretical bridge.

While the Jackson State shootings' connection to the larger Black Power Movement contributed to its exclusion from civil rights narratives, media coverage of the event also set in motion the American public's disregarding the event. Media sources play a significant role in the process of historical production. News stories effectively combine the first three steps

²⁵⁹ Spofford, *Lynch Street*, 19.

²⁶⁰ Williamson, *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower*, 135-136.

of the production process outlined by Trouillot: the making of sources, the making of archives, and the creation of narratives.²⁶¹ Many Americans recollect historical events based solely on versions propounded by the media. Media coverage of the Jackson State shootings conveyed the relative insignificance of this event when compared to the similar shootings in Kent. Not only did the media not cover Jackson State as extensively, the coverage that did appear endorsed an interpretation of the events that relegated the deaths in Jackson to the margins of history. For the media, Phillip Gibbs and James Green merely represented the latest in a long line of young black men killed in Mississippi. By explaining the shootings as a byproduct of strenuous race relations—rather than a response to American foreign policy—the media turned the deaths in Jackson into a decidedly “Southern problem,” thereby excusing the rest of the country from shouldering any of the blame. On the other hand, because the media portrayed Kent State as a national tragedy—an ill-fated attempt by the students in Ohio to shake the country out of its war-induced moral slumber—the protests and shootings in Kent became the premier example of Vietnam Era unrest.

The federal government’s investigations of campus unrest also awarded disproportionate attention to Kent State. Thus, Americans who read them, and historians who have uncritically relied on them, reach similar conclusions about the relative importance of events in Ohio and Jackson. If Jackson State garners mention in historical ruminations of the Vietnam War, it appears as a side note to the supposedly more relevant events in Kent. The real tragedy lies in the authority of both the media and the government to define the parameters of the nation’s “moral slumber” in a way that validates the value of white life

²⁶¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

over black life. As long as the death of black students remains secondary, white America need not question or confront the immorality of white supremacy.

Although historians have set about rescuing events like Jackson State from the margins of history, due to the breach between historical scholarship and the American public, the traditional narrative of the civil rights era persists in the nation's collective memory, as Tompkins's oral history demonstrates. In their study concerning Americans' everyday interactions with history, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen show that reading scholarly monographs ranks near the bottom. Respondents in Rosenzweig's and Thelen's study, "accused scholars of failing to recognize the feel of the real world, indeed in some cases of writing abstractions for other scholars rather than talking about everyday experience in everyday language."²⁶² Studies such as theirs also help explain why some distorted narratives of events persevere in America's collective memory, despite scholarship that attempts an intervention.

This study has implications for how historians conduct their work. In the case of the Jackson State shootings, a neglected event with great potential for enriching narratives of the American experience during the Vietnam era, we see clearly the imperative of using scholarship to inaugurate broader public conversations. Chief among these is the power of collective memory to shape national identity. Until African American memories are accorded equal weight, we cannot understand who we have been or who we might become.

²⁶² Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 15-22, 104.

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