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## *Remembering and Forgetting Black Power in Mississippi Burning*

Kristen Hoerl

The 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* brought hate crimes from the civil rights era to the big screen. In the film's opening scene, local police stop three men, two white and one black, in a car on an otherwise deserted country road late at night. After the car pulls to the side of the road, a police officer approaches the car, calls the driver a "nigger loving Jew," draws his pistol to the driver's temple, and fires. As the screen goes black, sounds of additional shots ring out, and another man's voice declares, "At least I shot me a nigger." The rest of the film depicts the FBI's struggle to solve the case of these murders. This fictional movie was loosely based on the FBI's 1964 investigation of the disappearance and subsequent murders of civil rights activists James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. Following the film's opening scene, FBI agents struggle to find the bodies of the missing activists and apprehend their killers in the face of daunting obstacles posed by local Mississippi police. Through their perseverance and commitment to civil rights, the FBI overcomes these challenges and arrests the activists' murderers in the film's final scene.

In real life, Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman came to Neshoba County, Mississippi, in June 1964 as part of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. This project was a joint effort of leading civil rights organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to bring more than 1,000 black and white activists from the North to register blacks to vote in Mississippi. By depicting events surrounding the activists' disappearance, this film brought renewed attention to the violence activists faced during the civil rights era. During interviews with the press, the film's director, Alan Parker, told reporters that he made *Mississippi Burning* because he wanted to bring people "largely ignorant of the

events from two decades ago" to "some level of understanding [about events] that radically changed the South and the nation" (Hall C01). Parker suggested that his film would educate audiences about racial violence in U.S. history.

*Mississippi Burning* created a media stir when it first appeared. The film initially received rave reviews and commercial box office success. It generated \$34 million at the box office after it was released to theaters in December 1988 ("Business Data"). The movie was nominated for six Academy Awards for that year, including one for best picture. Gene Hackman and Frances McDormand received Academy Award nominations for best actor and best supporting actress (respectively) for their performances, and the film won the Oscar for best cinematography (Curry D1).

Months after *Mississippi Burning's* release, however, film critics and scholars passionately condemned the film. Several film critics faulted it for misrepresenting the FBI's actual role in the search for the missing men and for downplaying the role of black activists in the civil rights movement (Marquand; Milloy; Ringel). The film never mentioned the names Chaney, Schwerner, or Goodman, nor did it depict events surrounding the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The movie also provided a misleading depiction of the FBI's role in the civil rights struggle; in reality, FBI agents frequently ignored cases of police repression of activists. Critics concluded that *Mississippi Burning* symbolically supported white supremacy even though the film's main characters embraced civil rights (Brinson; Madison). Media scholar Kelly Madison argued that the film's emphasis on white men's heroism positioned blacks as nothing more than victims. Critics of *Mississippi Burning* presumed that movies about the past should have a direct correspondence with historical narratives to promote greater understanding of social and political power in the United States. In their analysis of *Amistad*, another film depicting racism in U.S. history, rhetoric scholars Marouf Hasian and Cheree Carlson expressed concern that entertainment films that claim to educate audiences actually obscure "detailed understanding of the actual experiences of those who have lived in the past" (43). These scholars suggested that depictions of the past that do not reflect the historic record inhibit awareness about social injustice.

Although critics are correct to point out that *Mississippi Burning* did not faithfully depict historical events surrounding the real-life disappearances of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, I argue that these criticisms overlook some of the ways in which the film advances the cause of racial justice. On a formal level, *Mississippi Burning* evokes the struggles experienced by members of the Black Power movement, a social movement that emerged on the heels of civil rights. Looking at the film in the context of this movement, I argue that *Mississippi Burning* is a homology for the Black Power movement. Barry Brummett describes a homology as a situation in which "two or more kinds of experience appear or can be shown to be structured according to the same pattern in some important particulars of their material manifestations" (39–40). In this chapter, I explain how the film's plot revolves around the types of conflicts and solutions to racial injustice that propelled the Black Power movement.

To set the context for understanding how this film parallels Black Power, I describe the events that propelled the Black Power movement and the rhetoric of Black Power articulated by Stokely Carmichael, a prominent Black Power spokesperson. Then I analyze *Mississippi Burnings* plot in the context of Carmichael's speeches. By interpreting the film's

narrative in the context of Carmichael's rhetoric, I demonstrate how the film's storyline formally embodies the conflicts that Carmichael experienced and described during Black Power's heyday. I also demonstrate how the solutions arrived at by the film's protagonists mirror Black Power's response to racial injustices toward the end of the 1960s. By formally enacting the reasoning processes engaged in by Black Power proponents, the film challenges the justice of the then existing political system. The Black Power movement was an important response to ongoing racial injustices at the end of the civil rights era. By looking at the ways in which the film formally depicts similar responses to injustice, this analysis offers unique insights about the rhetorical role of this "civil rights" film. It also challenges the assumption that historically situated films must represent events with fidelity to the past in order to make a statement about social injustice and political power.

### **The Historical Development of the Black Power Movement**

Emerging on the heels of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement responded to the political and economic repression of blacks and civil rights activists during the mid-1960s. Jeffrey Ogbar defines Black Power as "a rigorous affirmation of blackness and racial pride and an insistence on the economic and political liberation of black people, independent of whites" (37). This movement signaled a new political consciousness among African Americans. In contrast to the civil rights goals of achieving formal inclusion within the American political system, Black Power sought political empowerment separate from white-governed institutions. Black Power activists also repudiated the civil rights principle of nonviolence in favor of armed self-defense against violent white suppression of blacks. Events in the history of the black freedom struggle as well as the living conditions within African American communities help to account for Black Power's emergence.

Black Power's political philosophy was a response to ongoing civil rights injustices and the dismal living conditions of African Americans throughout the United States. By the 1960s, blacks were still excluded from U.S. educational and political institutions. A series of beatings and murders of civil rights activists pointed to the lengths many whites were willing to go to prevent integration in prevailing institutions in the South. A federal grand jury acquitted Mississippi State Representative E. H. Hurst for the murder of black farmer Herbert Lee on the basis of false charges that Hurst acted in self-defense (Bacciocco 46). Likewise, Medgar Evers's murderer, Byron de la Beckwith, was not convicted for Evers's death until 1994 despite the strong physical evidence against him (Nossiter preface). In addition to the courts' failure to convict men for the deaths of civil rights activists, federal agents passively stood by as state authorities intimidated SNCC volunteers and blacks attempting to register in Selma, Alabama, in September and October of 1963. Public officials who turned a blind eye to attacks against civil rights activists suggested that violence against protesters was condoned by government officials.

In 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, making it illegal for states to compel racial segregation or prevent African Americans from voting. Because little enforcement power reinforced the Civil Rights Act, white supremacists throughout the South continued to harass and beat civil rights activists and blacks who attempted to register to vote. Two civil rights organizations, CORE and the SNCC, had been profoundly

influenced by violence against blacks and activists in the preceding years. The summer of 1964 witnessed not only the deaths of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman but arrests of thousands of peaceful protesters, the bombings of 30 black-owned buildings, and the destruction of three-dozen black churches by fire (Marable 91). That year, white and black civil rights activists from Mississippi organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the exclusion of blacks from Mississippi politics. At their national convention in Atlanta that year, the Democratic Party's white leaders refused to recognize the MFDP as a legitimate arm of the party. The outcome of the 1964 Democratic Convention confirmed many activists' position that the nation's injustices would not be eradicated via reform within the system.

Many CORE and SNCC activists concluded that neither formal civil rights legislation nor strategies of nonviolent protest would convince white racists to support biracial democracy and justice. Johnson's dismissal of activists also prompted many of them to believe that the federal government had abandoned them. Edward Bacciooco writes that the generation of black activists who came of age during the 1960s concluded that social change would not be won by working within political institutions (31). Consequently, CORE and SNCC began to part from the more established Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), an organization that held fast to reformist goals and to the principle of nonviolent dissent.

Black activists expressed their growing disdain for electoral politics and formal civil rights in 1966 when SNCC elected Stokely Carmichael and CORE elected Floyd McKissick to lead them. In contrast to earlier, more mainstream leaders such as John Lewis and James Farmer, these younger leaders suggested that black activists must wrest away political power for themselves. The slogan "Black Power" first emerged on the political scene in 1966 during the March Against Fear. On June 5, James Meredith began his one-man march across the state of Mississippi to encourage black citizens to assert their right to vote. Two days into the march, Meredith was shot by a sniper. Civil rights organizations including SNCC and the SCLC mobilized to continue the march. During this march, Stokely Carmichael articulated SNCC's departure from the mainstream movement by supporting the growing militancy of self-defense organizations. Rejecting King's slogan, "Freedom Now," SNCC member Willie Ricks led marchers in calls for "Black Power." On June 16, Carmichael reinforced SNCC's position in his reaction to police harassment against demonstrators: "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power" (Peniel 2).

Carmichael and other Black Power advocates found inspiration in black leaders from the North, where dismal poverty in black communities indicated that integration was not enough to improve living conditions for African Americans. Many black communities in the North and the West also faced ongoing police harassment. Police treatment of African Americans, growing economic disparities between white and black communities, and political struggles sparked race riots in urban ghettos throughout the country, including Detroit, Harlem, and Chicago. One of the deadliest riots took place August 11–14, 1965, in the Watts area of Los Angeles, California, leaving 34 people dead, 1,000 injured, and 4,000 in jail (T. Anderson 132). The growing militancy, anger, and spirit of radicalism in the urban ghettos of the North and the West fueled the Black Power movement (Ogbar 146). As a

spokesperson for many people living in these ghettos, Malcolm X laid the groundwork for Black Power by arguing that the entire political system was responsible for black citizens' ongoing economic exploitation and political repression. In his famous April 3, 1964, speech, aptly titled "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X stated that the federal government had failed black citizens. In a veiled warning to government officials, Malcolm X suggested that, if blacks didn't receive the political representation they deserved, they would take up arms to defend their rights.

### **Stokely Carmichael's Black Power Rhetoric**

The principles of black self-determination, self-defense, and solidarity were taken up by Stokely Carmichael during his years as the president of the SNCC. From the summer of 1966 to the spring of 1967, Carmichael toured the United States, speaking frequently to both black and white audiences. Carmichael, who took the name Kwame Ture in 1968, organized his speeches around his definition of Black Power.<sup>1</sup> For him, this term meant the ability of blacks to redefine the meanings of blackness and to assert the value of black culture, blacks' responsibility to other blacks, and the importance of organizing the black community to attain political and economic strength (Scott and Brockriede 116). Carmichael's definition responded, at least in part, to his growing disdain for mainstream political institutions. His April 19, 1967, speech at Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington, and his October 29, 1966, speech on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley are typical of the speeches he delivered elsewhere. In his speeches, Carmichael described the problems facing blacks in the United States, the roots of the problems, and the solutions he thought necessary for ending racial injustice. As we shall see in the following section of this chapter, these same kinds of problems, causes, and solutions drive *Mississippi Burning's* plot.

Carmichael believed that the central institutions governing the United States did not support black people's interests. During his speech at Berkeley, he stated, "It is impossible for white and black people to talk about building a relationship based on humanity when the country is the way it is, when the institutions are clearly against us" ("Black Power"). For Carmichael, the problems for black people were economic as well as political. He argued that poverty was "well calculated" in the United States and that poverty programs wouldn't work because "the calculators of poverty" were administering it. Carmichael believed that the American political, legal, and economic system was corrupted because the individuals assigned to protect the community were also those most likely to maintain white privilege. The Black Power advocate concluded that reforms within the existing political system would not guarantee the fundamental rights of people of color. Working from black philosopher Frantz Fanon's assertion that "man cannot condemn himself," Carmichael argued that the American political system was incapable of recognizing how its political and legal system perpetuated social injustice.

Carmichael believed that fundamental changes to the political system were necessary for blacks to win political and economic power. In part, Carmichael suggested that these changes could be met by reframing the political identity of the black community. Carmichael frequently reaffirmed black people's own entitlement and authority over their lives.

In both speeches mentioned previously he insisted, "Nobody gives anybody their freedom." The problem, he argued, was that America had denied blacks their freedom. Instead of recognizing the political authority of the federal government, Carmichael appealed to a higher law of individual autonomy to guide black people's actions. Carmichael entreated audiences at Berkeley to consider how blacks might begin to realize their own political power.

How can we build institutions where . . . people can begin to function on a day-to-day basis, where they can get decent jobs, where they can get decent houses, and where they can begin to participate in the policy and major decisions that affect their lives?

The Black Power leader suggested that, once black people recognized their own authority, they would be ready to demand recognition from the larger political system. Referencing the U.S. war in Vietnam, Carmichael told Berkeley students,

We have to say to ourselves that there is a higher law than the law of a racist named McNamara. There is a higher law than the law of a fool named Rusk. And there's a higher law than the law of a buffoon named Johnson. It's the law of each of us.

For Carmichael, the principle of self-determination rendered the authority of the U.S. government illegitimate. "This country is a nation of thieves. It stands on the brink of becoming a nation of murderers. We must stop it." Carmichael appealed to the solidarity among black people rather than the goodwill of existing authorities:

We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things that we have to be able to function. . . . The question is, will white people overcome their racism and allow for that to happen in this country? If that does not happen, brothers and sisters, we will have no choice but to say very clearly, "Move over, or we're going to move on over you."

As the above passage suggests, Carmichael believed that a cohesive organization of black people would be a strong force for social change.

The principle of self-determination also warranted the activist's support for armed self-defense. Carmichael argued that the appeal to nonviolence was a double standard in American politics; it was senseless to advocate for nonviolent forms of protest when white supremacists had maintained their position of power through violent suppression. Further, he argued, U.S. intervention in Vietnam relied on violence. Carmichael insisted that the only time that mainstream political figures condemned violence was when black people posed a threat to the white establishment.

Carmichael stated that blacks' self-defense from white violence was both legitimate and ethical given that the political system offered black people little protection. At Berkeley, he compared U.S. law enforcement to the German Gestapo under Hitler, asserting, "This is

not 1942, and if you play like Nazis, we're playing back with you this time around." Carmichael made stronger assertions of self-defense in his Seattle speech. The SNCC leader drew from Malcolm X by defining Black Power as the "coming together of black people to fight for their liberation by any means necessary." He clarified his position on the role of violence in the struggle for black empowerment. "Yeah I'm violent," he declared. "Somebody touch me, I'll break their arm." Carmichael suggested he would disable anyone who threatened his political autonomy. Further, he maintained that Black Power advocates were not making idle threats: "We're just making it crystal clear to the honky today that if he try to shoot us, we gonna kill him 'fore God gets the news. Period!" Carmichael then explained that the threat of violence was nothing new to the black community: "We have been the recipients of violence for over 400 years. We've just learned well how to use it today." For Carmichael, the legacy of violence against blacks demonstrated that whites' political power in the United States was won at the expense of black people's lives. "Our guts and blood have been spilled for this country. It's time we spill them for our people." With this incendiary conclusion, Carmichael issued a warning to the white community that, if black demands were not met, blacks would rise up to retaliate.

Carmichael's speeches typically followed a pattern of argument that addressed the problems of, causes of, and solutions for racial injustice. In each of his speeches, Carmichael asserted that racial injustices continued to undermine blacks' efforts toward self-determination. He further argued that the central governing institutions in the United States were a primary source of political injustice because they did not recognize the fundamental rights of black people. Thus, injustices against blacks from within the political system warranted blacks' disregard for legal authority and their use of retaliatory justice.

### ***Mississippi Burning as Black Power in Disguise***

Although *Mississippi Burning* never mentions Carmichael or the Black Power movement, the film's storyline formally embodies the types of problems, sources, and solutions to racial injustice that drove Carmichael and other black activists. *Mississippi Burning* revolves around the struggles of two fictional FBI agents to solve the mysterious disappearance of three unnamed civil rights activists in fictional Jessup County, Mississippi. Rupert Anderson, played by Gene Hackman, and Alan Ward, played by Wilem Defoe, endeavor to find the missing men and bring their murderers to justice in the face of obstacles posed by local police. Jessup County Sheriff Stuckey and Deputy Clinton Pell, the film's central antagonists, present daunting challenges to the FBI's efforts to solve the case. The agents' conflicts, their analysis of the problem, and their methods for resolving the case in face of local police obstruction parallel the central themes that drove the Black Power movement. As the following analysis of the film explains, parallels between the film and the movement illuminate how *Mississippi Burning* functions as a homology for Black Power.

### ***Activists Disguised as FBI Agents***

The film's depiction of trenchant racism and disregard for outsiders (nonwhites, non-Southerners) by local officials in Mississippi parallels black activists' experiences throughout the United States. This parallel provides an important link connecting the film to Black



Power. *Mississippi Burning* depicts Mississippi law enforcement—ostensibly a force for justice—as an agency dedicated to racial segregation. In one of the film’s first scenes, Agent Ward describes the station as a “big building in a small town.” When the two agents meet Sheriff Stuckey to discuss the activists’ disappearance, the sheriff wryly asks, “You down here to help us solve our nigger problems?” Stuckey then states that the activists’ disappearance “was a publicity stunt cooked up by that Martin Luther King feller.” The FBI’s initial meeting with the sheriff establishes the local police force as an overarching and racist presence. A later scene reaffirms the political power of the local police. In this scene, Ward and Anderson struggle to persuade members of the black community to speak with them. One boy, the only person willing to address the FBI, tells the agents, “The reason they don’t want to talk to you is they’re afraid it will get back to the law.” After Ward responds, “We are the law,” the boy’s father asserts, “Not around here you ain’t.” The boy tells the agents that they ought to talk to the sheriff’s office if they want to learn why the activists disappeared. Overshadowing the FBI’s legal authority, local police thus completely control Jessup County.

The film’s depiction of local officials as racist and oppressive would be expected in a film about civil rights or Black Power. Indeed, local police often stood in the way of civil rights. In real life, Neshoba County Sheriff Rainey and his Deputy Clinton Pell arrested Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman and released them into the hands of local Klansmen the night they disappeared (Cagin and Dray). Even when local public officials did not physically harm civil rights supporters, they obstructed black citizens’ rights. In an effort to prevent blacks from voting, registrars often gave blacks next to impossible exams when they registered to vote. Whites were never required to take such exams. Outside the South, police brutality was also frequent (Ogbar 84-85).

Despite the film’s resonance with civil rights efforts in the past, the film’s depiction of the FBI agents is an unexpected reversal in content. *Mississippi Burning* depicts the FBI as the only individuals actively seeking justice for African Americans. The film establishes the agents’ commitment to civil rights early in the script. In the first scene with Ward and Anderson, we learn that one of Ward’s previous assignments was to protect James Meredith from white violence when Meredith became the first black man to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962. We also learn that Anderson decided to leave his position as a Mississippi sheriff to work with the FBI because he could not stomach the South’s racism.

On the level of content, it is paradoxical that the film’s primary agents for black empowerment are FBI agents, representatives of one of the foremost political institutions that Black Power proponents challenged. The film’s focus on the FBI downplays how black activists played a predominant role in the civil rights struggle and misrepresents the FBI’s actual relationship with local officials during the civil rights struggle. In their history of the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, Cagin and Dray reveal that the FBI had an amicable relationship with the Neshoba County police (324). Rather than recall the FBI’s friendly relations with local police, these FBI agents’ struggles with local police formally recall the experiences of black activists.

Just as officials in Mississippi denied blacks their civil rights in history, fictional local officials deny Ward and Anderson’s legal authority. An early scene amplifies the FBI’s position in the film. During their first night in Jessup County, the men find a burning cross

blazing in front of their hotel room. This marker was a common emblem of racial hatred and warned blacks that they would likely face greater physical dangers for pursuing civil rights. By facing similar obstacles that black activists faced during the civil rights era, *Mississippi Burning* thus positions Ward and Anderson as symbolic stand-ins for black activists. The agents' experiences through the course of the film illustrate why many civil rights activists called for "Black Power" toward the end of the 1960s.

Throughout the film, local police under Sheriff Stuckey collaborate with local Klu Klux Klan members to undermine the FBI investigation. Klan members respond to every development in the FBI's case by terrorizing the black community. The film frequently provides startling images of KKK members beating African Americans in response to the FBI's continued investigation into the activists' disappearance. Likewise, the film conveys spectacular images of black churches burned to the ground and homes firebombed in broad daylight as the FBI agents get closer to solving the case. Depictions of Southern brutality against blacks is not only a reflection in content of civil rights history itself but is part of the film's formal homology for Black Power. Within the context of the film's formal resonance to Black Power activism, these scenes stand symbolically for events extending beyond Mississippi racism in 1964.

A central distinction between Black Power and earlier civil rights was Black Power's insistence that the Southern states were not alone in supporting racial injustice. Reading the film's content alone, a Black Power proponent might critique the film for focusing on Southern racism to the exclusion of other forms of racial injustice that existed throughout the United States. The FBI's relationship with Stuckey and his officers, however, positions the local police as symbols for broader political structures that stood in the way of black empowerment. Just as the FBI stands for the position of black activists during the civil rights era, Mississippi law enforcement serves as a metonymy for the central institutions governing the United States. Metonymies are present whenever a part of something stands in for the whole issue, object, or event. Perhaps not coincidentally, Black Power advocates frequently used the figure of the police officer to symbolize U.S. political and economic control of non-Western nations. Describing U.S. ties to underdeveloped nations during his speech at Berkeley, Carmichael referred to the United States as a "policeman of the world" willing to wage war against less powerful countries if it suited its interests. The police officer as a metonymy for the broader U.S. political system is a point of intersection connecting Black Power to the movie. From the perspective of Black Power, the intransigence of the police in the film formally recalls the federal government's resistance to black struggles for broader political and economic empowerment.

### *Irredeemable Mississippi*

The local officials' failure to find justice for blacks, as well as their commitment to racial inequity, also formally connects the film to Black Power by indicating that injustices are perpetuated by the legal system. Early in the film, Anderson mocks the lyrics to a hate-filled song, "The Klu Klux Klan is here to stay." This line, in addition to several scenes that follow this one, attests to the Klan's prevalence in Jessup County. Klansmen connected to the local police obstruct the FBI's case by threatening local blacks at every turn. In one especially dramatic scene, three white men punish the family of the one boy who dared to

speak with FBI agents. The men sneak into the family's barn and set it on fire, killing the family's livestock. The movie projects sounds of cows groaning in desperation as the fire engulfs the barn. As the boy leads his mother and little brother to safety, the Klansmen strike the boy's father and hang him from a rope tied to a tree in front of his house. (The boy unties his father after the Klan members drive off.) Violent images of Klansmen beating black people in response to the FBI's investigation suggest that racism is entrenched in the fabric of Mississippi society.

Other scenes demonstrate that the white power structure in the South supported the Klan's ruthless victimization of blacks. After four Klan members are put on trial for fire-bombing a black family's house, the county judge concludes that the men's crimes were provoked by outside influences and suspends their sentences. The judge's conclusion indicates that the FBI cannot prevent or hinder the Klan's unmitigated torture of blacks and civil rights activists. By highlighting how local officials treated white supremacists as above the law, this scene illustrates Carmichael's assertion that those governing the political and legal institutions in the United States could not be counted on to support racial justice. This scene also indicates that moral culpability is not treated as a matter of justice in the American legal system. As Carmichael stated in Berkeley, morality is a matter of "who has power to make his or her acts legitimate."

Both the film and Black Power activists indicate that justice cannot be won by working within central governing institutions. A short piece of dialogue from the film closely mirrors Carmichael's rhetoric on this point. Clues about the unknown assailants' identities point to the local sheriff's office. As Ward and Anderson get close to solving the case, Anderson determines that Deputy Pell was with the Klan the night the activists disappeared. After Ward asks, "Do you think he'll crack?" Anderson responds, "Down here they say rattlesnakes don't commit suicide." Anderson's response is a colorful adage for Carmichael's assertion that "America cannot condemn herself." Indeed, Carmichael told his Seattle audience that Sheriff Rainey (the film's character Sheriff Stuckey was loosely based on Rainey) was elected to maintain segregation. Carmichael reasoned that Neshoba County would not indict Rainey for his role in the activists' deaths because doing so would also implicate the county's residents in the activists' deaths. Using the figure of the police officer, Carmichael suggested that reforms within the prevailing system would not achieve justice for blacks as long as white proponents of racist policies remained in positions of authority.

The next scene in *Mississippi Burning* amplifies this point. After Anderson concludes that Pell was involved in the activists' disappearance, the FBI questions Pell about his affiliation with the Klan. Pell denies involvement with the KKK and refuses to answer further questions. Leaving the FBI office, he sneers, "Good luck. If you all get enough to indict me, you'll know where to find me." Outside the FBI office, Sheriff Stuckey mutters, "Don't you worry about a goddam thing." Pell and Stuckey indicate that local officials would not hold themselves accountable for the activists' deaths. Their intransigence vividly illustrates Carmichael's assertion that public officials responsible for blacks' victimization would not promote the cause of racial justice.

The failure of institutions to serve the cause of justice is a key theme throughout the film. Although the agents locate the bodies of the missing activists midway through the

film, they can't find physical evidence linking the local police force or local Klan members to the activists' deaths. Indeed, when Anderson questions Frank Bailey, the police officer who shot the white activist in the head in the film's first scene, Bailey tells Hackman, "Still suits in Washington D.C. ain't gonna change us . . . unless it's over my dead body [pause] or a lot of dead niggers." Through Bailey, Anderson learns that Klansmen believe that the local police force and the state's judicial system will protect them from punishment for injuring or killing blacks. Bailey admits that he wouldn't give more thought to killing an African American than "wringing a cat's neck" and declares, "There ain't a court in Mississippi that'd convict me." For Anderson, Bailey's confidence in the racism of Mississippi's legal system proves that formal procedures for FBI conduct will never substantially challenge state authorities who sanction violence against blacks. Positioned against the FBI agents, local police are symbolic of a larger political system that will not concede its power to a higher authority. The film's depiction of local police embodies Carmichael's assertion that racial injustices are not the result of isolated actions of individuals but endemic to the political system at large.

#### *Racial Justice "By Any Means Necessary"*

Based on the conclusion that the roots of racial injustice were embedded in foremost legal institutions, Black Power advocates, as well as *Mississippi Burning's* FBI agents, concluded that justice must be won by going outside the law. In the movie, depictions of local police intransigence to the FBI's case provide the rationale for Ward and Anderson's unorthodox approach to solving the case during the second half of the film. Since they believe that the system is unable to reform itself, the FBI decide to act on a higher authority. Doing "whatever it takes" for the cause of justice is a third theme that runs throughout *Mississippi Burning*, providing another formal link to the Black Power movement.

Early in the film, Ward demonstrates an unassailable commitment to civil rights. After a fellow agent informs him that the manager of the motel where they are staying wants the FBI off his property, Ward instructs the agent to buy the building and do "whatever it takes" for the FBI to continue its investigation. Ward's response evokes the urgency of Black Power advocates' call for racial justice "by any means necessary." Ward aggressively pursues the investigation, calling for 100 naval reservists to search the nearby river bottoms for the bodies of the missing men. Anderson warns him to tone down his efforts and to avoid starting a war between blacks and white supremacists in the area, but Ward hears none of it. As he tells Anderson, "It was a war long before we got here." The conflict between Ward and Anderson echoes the struggle between more moderate civil rights activists and Black Power activists. Sharing Anderson's cautious approach, civil rights activists believed that racial justice would best be achieved by pushing for gradual changes within the white-operated system; by contrast, Black Power activists were more aggressive, demanding fundamental social change as the condition for blacks' freedom.

Despite his reservations about Ward's methods, Anderson is the film's foremost Black Power advocate. Anderson concludes that the legal and political system in Mississippi is inept and unwilling to find justice for the slain activists. Given the injustices embedded within the arms of the law and justice systems, Anderson decides that the federal agents

will have to act outside the law to achieve justice for those who have been wronged. Anderson frequently resorts to threats and physical force when local police officers refuse to cooperate with the FBI's investigation. When his efforts to question Officer Bailey prove fruitless, Anderson reaches below his table, presumably grabbing Bailey's testicles. While Bailey groans in agony, Anderson tells him, "We're gonna' be here until this thing's finished." In the next scene, Ward confronts Anderson for intimidating the officers and for failing to follow FBI procedure. "We're not thugs Mr. Anderson. . . . If that was bureau business, I want to know about it." Although Ward indicates that he is willing to do "whatever it takes" to solve the case, he is committed to following FBI procedure during the first half of the film. Tension between Anderson and Ward thus grows as Anderson becomes increasingly frustrated by the FBI's powerlessness.

Conflicts between Ward and Anderson (both of whom are civil rights supporters) parallel the tensions that occurred between mainstream civil rights organizations and younger Black Power proponents. Ward's commitment to rooting out the killers of the slain activists through formal procedures of investigation complement the more mainstream efforts of the past to achieve civil rights from within the prevailing political institutions. Although both civil rights and Black Power organizations sought political empowerment for blacks, the mainstream civil rights leaders strongly opposed principles and strategies within the Black Power movement. Ward's description of Anderson's behavior as thuggery mirrors the mainstream civil rights leaders' initial responses to Black Power. Organizations including the NAACP and the Urban League repudiated Carmichael's appeals to Black Power as "militant" and "threatening." Although Martin Luther King would not sign the statement for fear of strengthening divisions within the movement, he asserted that Black Power "connotes black supremacy and an anti-white feeling that does not or should not prevail" (Ogbar 63). Concomitantly, Anderson's charge that the activists' killers can only be apprehended if the FBI uses aggressive force is striking for its resonance with the solutions arrived at by supporters of the Black Power movement.

Despite early vocal disagreement with Black Power principles, civil rights leaders' stances on Black Power softened toward the end of the 1960s. As Black Power support grew, civil rights leaders expressed more openness to Black Power principles. Indeed, in 1967, King averred that white reprisals against Black Power activists only strengthened the Black Power position and "split the Negro from the larger society" (Ogbar 149). As King suggested, Black Power's position strengthened as their analysis of the political situation was reaffirmed by white supremacists' violence.

Just as Black Power activists believed that working within the political system would not win justice for blacks, Ward and Anderson come to agree that they will not be able to solve the case following FBI protocol. Unremitting Klan violence against the black community through the course of their investigation similarly tempers Ward's stance on proper FBI conduct. After Ward finds Mrs. Pell brutally beaten by her husband for helping the FBI, Ward reconsiders which steps will be necessary to bring the activists' killers to justice. The dialogue between Ward and Anderson toward the film's climax highlights Ward's evolving approach to combating white supremacy. In an effort to stop Anderson from retaliating against Deputy Pell for beating his wife, Ward implores Anderson, "We're

not killers. That's the difference between them and us." Anderson retorts, "That's the difference between them and *you*." Anderson demarcates himself from Ward, suggesting he is not beyond using retaliatory violence himself. After the two men tussle, Ward aims his gun at Anderson's temple and demands that Anderson listen to him.

*Ward:* We'll go after them together.  
*Anderson:* You wouldn't know how.  
*Ward:* You're gonna teach me how.  
*Anderson:* You wouldn't have the guts.  
*Ward:* Not only do I have the guts; I have the authority. No rules. We nail them any way we can, even your way.  
*Anderson*  
(incredulously): We do it my way?! With my people?!  
*Ward:* Whatever it takes.

By endorsing Anderson's methods for solving the case, Ward bridges the divide between him and Anderson. Ward's "no rules" approach to bringing the activists' killers to justice echoes Black Power's approach to finding justice for black people. Likewise, the FBI agents' struggles to assert their authority parallel the efforts made by the Black Power movement to reassert black people's authority over their own lives. Carmichael's appeal to the black community to hold itself accountable only to "the law of each of us" resonates with the FBI agents' final decision to take the law into their own hands.

The scenes that follow portray the FBI agents tricking and terrorizing Klan members to confess their involvement in the activists' deaths. Anderson threatens Deputy Pell in a barbershop with a razor blade positioned at Pell's throat and tricks one Klan member into believing that he needs FBI protection to survive impending attacks from fellow Klansmen. In another scene, Anderson flies an unnamed African American agent to Mississippi to interrogate the town's mayor and threaten him into providing the names of the Klansmen responsible for the deaths of the activists. Through a series of coercive actions, the FBI agents attain the evidence they need to arrest suspects in the activists' deaths.

The threats of violence against Klan members, which were presumably warranted by the Klan's own disregard for the law, enable Ward and Anderson to find some justice for the community. The film's final scenes depict the men involved in the activists' murders, including Sheriff Stuckey and Deputy Pell, being arrested by federal agents. By demonstrating that the activists' killers could only be brought to justice through the FBI's use of "dirty tricks," this film's conclusion suggests that people must sometimes go outside of the law to achieve justice and social equality. Presumably, the FBI's coercive and illegal measures to apprehend the activists' killers are inevitable outcomes of institutionally embedded injustice.

*Mississippi Burning* is a homology for Black Power, disguised as a false portrayal of the civil rights era. The themes that propel the film's narrative—local whites' disregard for the rights of others, the role of institutions in perpetuating injustice, and the disregard for legal procedure as a response to ongoing injustices—parallel the experiences and rhetoric of the

Black Power movement. Both the film and Black Power proponents underscored how powerful, white interests controlled the agencies for social justice; therefore, achieving social justice for blacks could not be won by working within them. Both narratives also suggested that institutionally embedded injustice provided the motivating force for protagonists to eschew the political and legal system. While the parallel structures in these two narratives point to the homological role of *Mississippi Burning*, the image of the police officer and depictions of racial injustice cut through both narratives, linking them together in both form and content.

## Conclusion

*Mississippi Burning* illustrates how films can correspond to political events in form, even though their content contradicts the historical record. Echoing Black Power's analysis of the contemporary political system, this film challenges mainstream perceptions of social justice. At the time of the film's release, few resources in popular culture represented the Black Power movement in content. By making the film's protagonists FBI agents, figures who typically embody law and order, the film masks its resonance to the radical activist movement. This reversal might have helped popularize this film among mainstream film-going audiences. This reversal might also have extended attention to other marginalized groups experiencing political injustices in the United States, including those subordinated by class and gender. The potential for other groups not aligned with the Black Power movement to identify with the film's main characters suggests that homologies are products of the political and economic circumstances in which humans create and reflect upon discourse.

*Mississippi Burning* is a homology for Black Power not necessarily due to any intentional or conscious efforts of the filmmakers but because both the film and Black Power proponents underscore the experiences of African Americans and groups who have struggled to change oppressive laws, customs, and other structural barriers to political inclusion, economic equality, and social justice. These structural barriers continue to shape many people's lives in the United States and elsewhere. As the Urban League concluded in 2007, significant disparities between blacks and whites remain in areas of income, achievement, health, and legal reform. For example, 25% of blacks live in poverty compared to 8% of whites, black male earnings are 75% that of white males, and 9.5% of African American men are unemployed compared to 4% unemployment for white men ("The State of Black America"). Both *Mississippi Burning* and Black Power rhetoric highlight the contradictions between many people's realities in the United States and the American Dream myth, which tells us that hard work and effort will lead to individual achievement and financial success. The film's counter-myth presents a homology for the ways that structural factors like race, gender, and class pose daunting barriers to the American Dream. Malcolm X, a leading proponent of black empowerment, called this counter-myth the "American nightmare." Fredric Jameson explains that films tap anxieties and aspirations in the historical world that rarely have presence in nonfiction media. As an iteration of the counter-myth of the American nightmare, *Mississippi Burning* figuratively expresses the broader social conflicts and anxieties under which the film was produced. The relationship between Ward and

Anderson metaphorically represents contradictions between the American ideals of social justice and equality and the practical realities of life, not only for black people in the southern United States during the 1960s but for all people who struggle against structural barriers to individual success. Black Power activists underscored these contradictions twenty years earlier, but it was the film that projected them into a venue accessible to wider—and whiter—audiences.

The patterns across *Mississippi Burning* and the Black Power movement suggest that films can give meaning to the past even if they aren't explicitly based on historical events. As rhetorical critics, we might look for ways in which struggles experienced by characters—even those in fictional texts—formally embody the experiences of real-life individuals living in times and places removed from the text at hand. Texts that pattern themselves after historic struggles can alert us to ongoing social problems, such as the concentration of power in the hands of a few or ongoing systemic injustices against subordinated groups. Solutions embedded in these texts might also provide insight into the present by suggesting ways in which similar responses can be made even now, but at a formal level.

There are some potential dangers in this approach. Breaks within a film's homology from the outside world could lead us astray. Despite its resonances to Black Power, the film's conclusion contrasted sharply with the history of Black Power during the movement's later years. Although the FBI's strategies successfully lead to the arrests of the corrupt police officers, Black Power's strategies of working outside the political system were largely unsuccessful. The movement declined in the early 1970s, partly due to FBI suppression of Black Power activism. FBI involvement in the shooting deaths of Black Panther Party activists Mark Clark and Fred Hampton attested to the lengths law enforcement authorities would go to curtail movements that fundamentally challenged the American political system (Blackstock; Wilkins and Clark). Rather than attend to the devastating outcomes of radical activism, the film's emphasis on coercion as central to the FBI's success provide a fantasy of vengeance against forces that perpetuate barriers to success and racial equality. By breaking from the history of the Black Power movement, the film ignores real-life possibilities for ordinary people to challenge the American Dream myth. The film's depiction of FBI agents arresting local Mississippi police involved in the activists' deaths ultimately redeems the American Dream, albeit bloodied by its civil rights past.

*Mississippi Burning* provides an imaginary solution to problems that parallel real-life difficulties for many Americans. Although the film formally recalls the Black Power movement's political struggles and indictment of mainstream political authority, the film's outcome has few parallels for subordinated groups in real life. Thus, the film bears only trace remnants of America's history of racial struggle. The film's conclusion reminds us to think critically about a text's homological resemblance to historical experience. Not only should we ask how a text formally resonates with historical experience but we should consider how it formally departs from that experience as well. In this way, we will be attentive to the ways in which films and other fictional texts forget the lessons of the past; likewise, we might strive for new forms to guide us toward more promising solutions to society's enduring conflicts.



## Note

1. Gallagher; Scott, and Brockriede; and Stewart give detailed analyses of Stokely's rhetoric.

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