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English 259

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“I Am Black, Therefore I Am”

Analyzing historical rhetoric can help one to better understand and appreciate past events. Stokely Carmichael’s speech he gave to Berkeley in October 1966 works on the issue regarding the injustices that African Americans are facing in the 1960s. Californians passionate for freedom and liberty were the kind of audience in which Carmichael was hoping to persuade. Carmichael was unlike any other speaker during the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century America. Born in Trinidad, and coming to America, he disapproved of the current laws, government, economic system, and the culture. This speech differed from the type of rhetoric in the South. Carmichael developed the idea that Black Power should be embraced by African Americans in order to have a more productive society.

In his speech, Carmichael’s goal is for blacks to appreciate their self-concept and formulate an identity for themselves. He strongly encourages blacks to be proud of their culture and heritage and set goals for themselves. This leader stresses the urgency for African Americans in the world to find their identity. When describing this exigency, he articulates:

We are not going to wait for white people to sanction Black Power. We’re tired waiting; every time black people move in this country, they’re forced to defend their

position before they move. It's time that the people who are supposed to be defending their position do that. That's white people. They ought to start defending themselves as to why they have oppressed and exploited us (Carmichael 358).

Carmichael argues that action needs to be taken to the inexcusable oppression and mistreatment of whites to blacks. He achieves that there is no logical reasoning for why blacks are oppressed. Not their attitude, not their demeanor, nor any other excuse, it is simple because of the color of their skin. He animatedly states, "I am black, therefore I am" (359). In a nation with such diversity, is it not only right that we accept one another? Blacks should not have to prove themselves in order to fit into the standards of whites. Carmichael urges the black community to embrace themselves as blacks, and not live life trying to conform to the definitions that whites set for African Americans.

Carmichael aims to fix the current political system in America because he feels as if it is damaged. He feels as though the current democracy does not fully represent African Americans. Instead, Carmichael supports the idea of Black Nationalism in which African Americans would lead and build their own communities and organizations. African Americans should have leaders that represent themselves, not whites. He states that the youth needs to be the leaders of today because the current leaders are unjust. Carmichael reviews the faults that whites lead this nation with, and settles that blacks should not have to deal with their injustices.

In his speech to young Berkeley students, Carmichael expresses his concerns with the current situation in the United States, and then offers solutions. Carmichael also counters current notions of integration that are being urged toward by predominant leaders of the civil

rights movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Carmichael shares his opinion on King as he notes:

I look at Dr. King on television every single day, and I say to myself: "Now there is a man who's desperately needed in this country. There is a man full of love. There is a man full of mercy. There is a man full of compassion." But every time I see Lyndon on television, I say, "Martin, baby, you got a long way to go" (360)

King hopes were to integrate Africans Americans into the white society through nonviolent protests. Carmichael positions himself with disapproval of segregation and integration. He questions these ideas because he feels white society could not benefit African Americans, therefore why should blacks have to deal with such people. He rather advocates the idea of separation. Separation is believed by Carmichael to be the most efficient manner for blacks to live their lives with the liberties that they deserve.

Carmichael forwards historical events at various moments in his speech in order to prove evidence of his believes on the politics of the United States. He notes as an example of the failures by whites, when white Americans have tried to enforce democracy in foreign countries. He references America's failures trying to spread democracy abroad in places, such as Vietnam, Puerto Rico, South America, South Africa, and the Philippines. In these areas, Americans have been known to have the tendency of being violent and abusive to natives. Carmichael actively declares, "This country [the United States] is not God, and that it cannot rule the world" (357). He chooses to illustrate this time period in order to provide the listener something to think about how at no means is the current democracy perfect. These are some of the many flaws that are represented by the injustices that blacks are encountered with.

The rhetoric technique Carmichael demonstrates utilizes key words in order to bring more effectiveness to his speeches. The word “honky” can be observed frequently in Carmichael’s speeches. Honky is a derogatory term to classify whites. The word may be defined using this definition, including its origin:

Comes from *hunky*, slang for those of Hungarian or Slavic descent. The first use was in the 1900’s when wealthy white men wanting black prostitutes would drive their car to the edge of a black neighborhood and honk the horn (Roadjunky).

Though this language may have been seen as effective, I see this as a limit for Carmichael because it had degraded the whites in society. Though many whites in America were criminal and unjust in the manner that they treated African Americans, there were also whites who supported the civil rights movement. Many students at Berkeley, and participants in Freedom Summer in 1964 supported African Americans attempts toward freedom. I understand Carmichael’s frustration with whites, though I believe this language could have been avoided.

There were several constraints to Carmichael giving his speech. A lot of white Americans did not react well to the ideas construed by Carmichael. Martin Luther King Jr.’s presentation of ending racism conflicted with Carmichael’s theory that action of separation of blacks from white society must occur in order for a more efficient society. Moderate blacks saw Carmichael’s ideas as a threat to the progress of the civil rights movement (“Stokely Carmichael”). Carmichael also had conflicts with authority during his attempts to spread his ideas, including a revocation of his passport for ten months after he voiced his opposition to the Vietnam War while abroad.

Before analyzing the rhetoric by Carmichael, I did not know too much about him, neither Berkeley in the 1960s. I read through Carmichael's speech intrigued on the powerful fights against whites, as well as his encouragement towards African Americans to discover and embrace their identities. Though I questioned why he chose this college to give this particular speech to. The groups of students who attended Berkeley in the 1960s intrigue me. After searching this college, I learned of a documentary, *Berkeley in the Sixties* from 1990. It is inspiring that the students had such determination, motivation, and bravery to fight for what is right in America, despite action and threats by law enforcement.

Carmichael chose to provide his speech to Berkeley because of the students that attend this college. In the 1960s, the Berkeley campus, as well as a majority of California, freely challenged societal issues. The students protested with persistence. They truly believed that their actions could and will have an effect on history, not only in the United States, but the whole world. A sense of community bonded students as they protested issues ranging from free speech, the Vietnam War, along with the civil rights movement. They were students enraged with the issues that threatened an individuals' freedom and liberties, and they were determined to change these issues.

In the documentary, "Berkeley in the Sixties", one of the students explains why the student body was so encouraged by Carmichael. During the era of the Vietnam War, the students were being told that nonviolence was tolerable, but nothing will progress, therefore "the stakes needed to be raised" (*Berkeley in the Sixties*). Bravely, these youths took their actions to the streets, and did not fear the threats by the college's administration or the police. Carmichael arrived on campus in October 1966, with the perfect opportunity to motivate these students with his argumentative rhetoric. Around this same time, the Black Panther

party, which had similar ideas as Carmichael, developed in the Oakland area of California.

This militancy and rhetoric of Black Nationalism intrigued students. One student comments, “I found their rhetoric seductive” (Berkeley in the Sixties). The rhetoric by Carmichael therefore inspired the students in their actions for change in America.

Stokely Carmichael is an influential leader from the civil rights era. Carmichael helped coin the term “institutional racism”. He believed that establishments were prejudice against the black population; therefore division between whites and blacks was the best option. This further helped to create strength, independence, pride, and identity in the black community. Fellow civil rights leader Jesse Jackson reflects upon Carmichael’s significance in America when he states, “He was one of our generation who was determined to give his life to transforming America and Africa. He was committed to ending racial apartheid in our country. He helped to bring those walls down” (Goldman).

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