JESSIE CARNEY SMITH AND THE RIOT OF 1967:
THE MAKING OF A BLACK POWER LIBRARIAN 1957-1967

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Jessie Carney Smith is one of the most significant figures in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement. Although some, including herself may not see it that way, she was a soldier. She may not have "put boots on the ground" like some more notable civil rights leaders but she was unquestionably an activist in her scholarship. Dr. Smith worked in libraries for over five decades, and she served as the Fisk University librarian for 55 years. Her career saw several periods of African American life. In fact, you can trace her career all the way back to the Harlem Renaissance. One can sort of see her career in the way James Baldwin described his life in the I am Not Your Negro documentary. She was one year younger than Martin, she was at Cornell when Malcolm became the face of the Nation of Islam, and she was librarian while John Lewis and Nikki Giovanni attended Fisk. It is said that it is impossible to talk about the civil rights movement without mentioning the Nashville sit-ins. In addition to that, people say there is no movement in Nashville without the student movement at Fisk University. And since the Fisk University library is one the sole conservators of that movement, how is the Fisk University librarian not recognized for her part in the movement? Scholars rely heavily on librarianship; specifically black scholars rely on black librarians for their research and promotion in the field.

From her time as a secretary for Bontemps, she was a student and teacher of the movement. Her entire career and contributions at Fisk to the field of library science deserve an entire book, but this paper looks at her first years in Nashville and how she evolved into a black power librarian. In the narrative of her first 10 years in Nashville, she encountered everything spanning from significant figures, events, protests, and policy reform. She came to Nashville under Jim Crow, and by 1967, she was at the center of the Black Power Revolution. These formative years undoubtedly shaped her next four decades of scholarship. There has been work done on Dr. Jessie Carney Smith, mainly dissertations written by Dr. Christa Hardy and Dr.

Brandon Owens. Although these dissertations talk about aspects of her life and career, neither focuses on her significance to civil rights or black studies. Dr. Hardy's dissertation Piecing of a Quilt looks to use her life as a symbol of black feminism. Dr. Owens's dissertation "The History of the Fisk University Library" focuses on the history of Fisk and its library collection. Although it discusses Dr. Smith's work in the library, it does not connect her career to the movement or to a much larger narrative. In his dissertation, Dr. Smith is a piece of an overall study of Fisk University's library history.

Abdul Alkalimat argues that "the black power movement spread the study of black people's history and culture as a national influence on all other movements and created emergent institutions, conferences, journals, bookstores, and independent schools."[1] Dr. Smith not only represents the mission of the black power movement, but she was also fundamental into bringing it into existence through her scholarly works. After her early years in Nashville, she became a bibliographer, writer, and preserver of Black life.

Historians and scholars have studied the race riots of 1960s. Historian Malcolm McLaughlin published *The long, hot summer of 67* in 2014. Subsequent books have discussed riots occurring in the big urban cities Detroit and Newark. In addition to that, there have been studies on the Nashville Riot of 1967. Articles published by Scott Frizzell and Jennifer Hitchens discuss Stokely Carmichael's visit to Nashville and how it led to Jefferson Street riot. Ben Houston's *The Nashville Way* discusses the emergence of the black power movement in Nashville in his chapter "Black Power/White Power: Militancy in Late 1960s Nashville." Therefore, the Nashville Riot of 1967 has been researched, but it does not get discussed in the context of the "long summer" of that year. In addition to that, Stokely Carmichael is one of the

[1] Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 7.

most studied figures of the Black Power era. His career has been chronicled from his early days in SNCC to his eventual role in the Black Panther Party. From 1966-67, Carmichael visited several college campuses across the country. Specifically, Carmichael's appearances at Fisk and Vanderbilt left an impact on Nashville's black population. In her 10th year in Nashville, Jessie Carney Smith was in the middle of a black power revolution. Fisk Students, faculty, and administration were a part of this revolution. Black militancy agitated whites, and association with militant action could mean being blacklisted in professional circles. How Jessie Carney Smith interacted and responded to the black power movement shaped how she would make Fisk a center for black public history. This period would also serve as motivation for her later career in publishing and librarianship. The transformation of the campus into a vocal and visible place of black power are vital in understanding who Jessie Smith is, and how she came to be.

EARLY LIFE

Jessie Carney Smith was born in Greensboro, North Carolina on September 24, 1930. Born in the south, during the Great Depression, she was raised during Jim Crow segregation. Smith had 3 siblings and her parents were James Ampler Carney and Vesona Bigelow Carney.[2] Both of Smith's parents were college educated, rare for African American households at the time. Mr. Ampler received a B.S in engineering and automobile mechanics, while Vesona became an educator. Although she did not graduate from college, she worked as a classroom teacher prior to marrying Dr. Smith's father. James Ampler also was a small business owner of J.A Carney's Square Deal Service Station. During her childhood and adolescence, Smith attended Mount Zion Elementary School and James Dudley High school. James B. Dudley high

[2] Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

school was the first African- American high school in Guilford County. A Rosenwald school, it was also a landmark location for the Greensboro uprising during the 1960s Black Power movement. Greensboro was also the site where Ella Baker started the first sit-in movement. During her time at Dudley High School, she received a background in black history. Taught by black educators, Smith believed that Greensboro was more progressive in teaching black history than other states in the south. "We were required to take a course in black history at schools. I think it is because of the number of black colleges in the state, and we did have a state official who supported black education."[3]

Since Smith and her siblings were encouraged to pursue a college education, she enrolled in North Carolina Agricultural &Technical State University. North Carolina A&T was established as the Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Colored Race by the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1891. At A& T, she had academic and social success. Smith and her sisters were empowered to be at A&T. Not only were they familiar with the campus, but the Smith sisters also felt protected by their own.[4] In her senior year, she was elected Miss A&T. In this position, she was an ambassador for the university. As Miss A&T, she remembers taking a picture with 4 baseball players who integrated the Major League Baseball Association (MLB). These players were Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Don Newcome, and Roy Campanella.[5] After graduating from A&T, she pursued studies in textiles and clothing at Cornell University for one semester. Like many who attended HBCUs, Cornell was her first experience in an integrated classroom setting. While there, Smith experienced racial and cultural stereotypes from her white counterparts. There was an assumption that southern education was inferior, particularly the

[3] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023
[4] Christa Valencia Hardy. "Piecing a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History." PhD Diss., (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010), 63.
[5] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

education of blacks. She left and moved back home and married Fredrick Douglass Smith. In 1956, she enrolled at Michigan State University and received a master's degree in child development. Smith's childhood undoubtedly shaped her perspective on race. Empowered by her family, educators, and environment, Smith came to Nashville aware of segregation and Jim Crow.

She and her family moved to Nashville, and she immediately looked for employment. However, due to a lack of positions available, she took a job as a clerk-typist for the English and Religion departments at Fisk University.[6] In those departments, she worked for Robert Hayden in the English department and William J. Faulkner. She would then be assigned to work for the Fisk University library under Arna Bontemps due to his secretary being on maternity leave.[7] Appointed chief librarian in 1943, Bontemps was known as one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

WORKING FOR BONTEMPS

Bontemps was at the epicenter of the Harlem black writers' group, and he established relationships during this period that would later shape his role as university librarian at Fisk. During his early Renaissance career, he would frequently collaborate with other black intellectuals and writers. His collaborations with Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, and several others would contribute to the growth of African American literature and culture. Born in Louisiana, Bontemps became famous for writing about his experiences through historical fictions, novels, and plays.[8] Inspired by the Du

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[6] Owens, "A History of Fisk University Library: 150 Years of African American Public History and Culture, 1866 – 2016," 152-53.
[7] Owens, 153; Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023
[8] "Arna Bontemps, Writer, 70, dies," New York *Times*, June 6, 1973; Carroll Van West, "Arnaud W. Bontemps," Tennessee Encyclopedia (Tennessee Historical Society, 2018).

Boisian ethos, he had an affinity for children's education and the Diaspora. After attaining his M.A from the University of Chicago Graduate Library School, he took over as head of the Fisk University library.[9] Immediately upon hire, Bontemps looked secure rare and significant items to enhance its collections. Bontemps had been eager to start working at Fisk soon after he returned to the South.

Like Jessie Smith, he did not intend on becoming a librarian. Bontemps initially pursued the position of Chair of Creative Writing. However, this position was held by James Weldon Johnson who was tragically killed during a train incident in the summer of 1938.[10] Because of the tragedy of his death and his great legacy at Fisk, President Thomas E. Jones felt that it would not be appropriate to fill his position. Before his arrival in 1943, he had completed all but his dissertation for a doctorate in English at the University of Chicago. In Bontemps's first year, Fisk received a rare copy of William Wells Brown' *Clotel* which was the first book published by an African American.[11] During the first decade of his tenure as librarian, Fisk became the repository of the American Missionary Association's valuable files.

In 1948, the Fisk library received its largest gift which was the library and pamphlet collection of the JRF. And by the of the 1940s, he prioritized processing all library and archive acquisitions. Shortly before Smith came to Nashville, during the 1952-53 academic year, Bontemps and President Johnson started working to secure the collection of W.E.B Du Bois. Based on Johnson's conversation with a close friend and classmate of Du Bois, he believed that Du Bois would be willing to donate to Fisk if contacted by a person he considered a personal

[9] West, "Arnaud W. Bontemps."
[10] Owens, 126.
[11] Ibid, 130.

friend.[12] Bontemps would not become successful in attaining his collection until 1961.[13] Due to Bontemps's personal relationship with Langston Hughes, Fisk had no issues in acquiring his collection. Bontemps saw his accomplishments in building the collections at Fisk as both a personal achievement and an achievement in black studies. As a student, Smith read about the Harlem Renaissance and was inspired by the writers of the movement. So, when she came to Fisk, it was an honor to be under Bontemps's mentorship. In her words, working with Bontemps was "like heaven."[14]

CHARLES S. JOHNSON, THE MOVEMENT AND FISK UNIVERSITY

It is also important to note that Jessie Smith came to Nashville under the administrative transition from Charles S. Johnson to Stephen Wright. In 1956, Fisk established the Charles S. Johnson Research Library. Charles S. Johnson was elected the first black president of Fisk University in 1946. And 1946 proved to be a pivotal year in the Tennessee Civil Rights movement. Prior to being elected president at Fisk, Johnson was appointed as head of the Sociology Department in 1928. Until 1930, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) had not recognized HBCUs. Of the seventeen HBCUs approved by SACS from 1930-39, Fisk was the one of two institutions to receive an "A" grade.[15] All seventeen of those institutions had white presidents. Public HBCUs with black presidents would not receive accreditation from SACS until the 1940s. Before becoming Fisk's president, Johnson was responsible for bringing several prominent faculty members to Fisk. As a member of the civil rights movement himself, Johnson navigated behind the scenes to promote social justice.

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[12] Letter, Arna Bontemps to W.E.B Du Bois, October 27, 1952, box 23, folder 10, Charles S. Johnson Presidential Papers.
[13] Owens, 148.
[14] Hardy, "Piecing a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History,"69.
[15] Bobby Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005)

Tennessee historian Bobby Lovett said that he played a vital role in building bridges between the races.[16]

Johnson managed to receive white funding to support his research on race relations. He also had enough political sway to influence local policy, while also encouraging peaceful protests among the black citizens in Nashville. In 1942, he received support from the American Missionary Association to sponsor the Race Relations Institute.[17] Nashville's white citizens were fearful that such a radical institute would bring in outside agitators. the presence of "outside agitators" would later become inevitable in Nashville. By the time Johnson assumed the position of president, he had assembled a faculty of black scholars, intellectuals, and activists. As both a faculty member and as president, Johnson had a close relationship with the Fisk library. He had helped curate and develop the collections since his arrival.

In 1929, he was personally asked to serve at the co-chair on the library committee by then President Thomas Jones.[18] On this committee, Johnson helped to establish funds to build the book collection as well as strategize plans for a new library building.[19] He and librarian Louis Shores worked to purchase collections that would be vital to the early black collections at Fisk. Johnson, like Arna Bontemps had roots in Harlem. One of Johnson's most crucial relationships was his relationship with Arturo Schomburg. "Of the many black scholars whom Schomburg assisted, Johnson was the only one with whom he developed an enduring and close relationship and friendship.[20] In Johnson's first year at Fisk, it was his vision that the library be a tool for the entire university. With the persistent recruitment efforts of Johnson and librarian Louis Shores,

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[16] Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History*, 14.
[17] Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman. *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 172-73.
[18] Letter, Thomas E. Jones to Charles S. Johnson, February 9, 1929, box 35, folder 1, Thomas E. Jones Collection.
[19] Owens, 59-60.
[20] Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile & Collector* (New York: Wayne University Press, 1989), 149.

they convinced Schomburg to curate the collection. Schomburg's short tenure in curating the collection at Fisk would become the foundation of Fisk's library collection.

JESSIE SMITH AND HER FIRST YEARS IN NASVILLE

During Smith's time as secretary, she was fascinated by all the prominent people she was able to encounter. In addition to Bontemps's connections, Fisk English professor Leslie M. Collins also had great relationships in Harlem. She recalls watching Bontemps work on new writing projects. Indicative of the lack of respect publications had for black writers at the time, several publications would reject Bontemps's work. Although he had such success as a poet and writer, his work on black history turned white publications away. During her nine months in the library, Bontemps encouraged her to pursue a career as a librarian.

In 1957, Smith would receive a Master's in library science from Peabody College (now part of Vanderbilt University).[21] At Peabody, she experienced racism from faculty and students. She said of the program, "There had only been one black student to graduate from there. And there was only one black student other than me, a Fisk alum, a part of the program." [22] Due to Jim Crow segregation, she and her classmate were forced to eat in separate dining areas. Peabody College had just made an agreement to accept black students into their library school in 1954.[23]

Although she enjoyed her time at Fisk, they did not have any librarian positions available at the time. For the next three years, she would work as head cataloguer and instructor at Tennessee State University. In 1960, with a grant-in-aid from the State of Tennessee, she left

[21] Jessie Carney Smith Dossier, Jessie Carney Smith unpublished collection, Fisk Special Collections & Archives
[22] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023
[23] Paul Conkin, *Peabody College: From a Frontier Academy to the Frontiers of Teaching and Learning* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 282.

Nashville to pursue a PHD in Library Science at the University of Illinois.[24] With an interest in understanding the resource discrepancies between HBCU and PWI libraries, she would write her dissertation on the "Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities". In working for Fisk and Tennessee State, Smith concluded that black libraries did not receive adequate financial support. Due to her experience at. Both TSU and Fisk, her dissertation looked to evaluate how university libraries were able to grow their collections on limited resources.

TRANSITIONING TO BLACK POWER

Before Jessie Smith became university librarian at Fisk, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 were passed, and Malcolm X was murdered. Nashville was a vital part of the Civil Rights Movement. College students became the face of the movement, and as it pertained to Nashville, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Nashville Student Movement changed black college campuses. According to Clayborne Carson,

"SNCC attracted southern black college students whose attitudes were confined within the narrow bounds of permissible political dissent of the Cold War era and the even narrower bounds imposed by the southern segregationist regimes."[25]

NASHVILLE STUDENT MOVEMENT

Initially SNCC modeled the nonviolent tenets of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King and the SCLC. Likewise, the Nashville student movement shared a commitment to

[24] Jessie Carney Smith unpublished collection, Fisk University Special Collections & Archives; Owens
[25] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.

Christian beliefs and nonviolence. So, it was not just their mission to be activists but also nonviolent leaders in the South. The faces of the Nashville student movement were student leaders from Fisk. Fisk provided most notably leaders such as Diane Nash Marion Berry, and later John Lewis. Diane Nash, who originally attended Howard University, transferred to Fisk in 1959. As one of SNCC's leader, Nash was known to have a calm but firm voice and be a very deliberate and sincere organizer.[26]Berry was a graduate student in Fisk's chemistry department and risked losing his scholarship by participating in the sit-ins.[27] During this time, Jessie Smith was in her position Tennessee State, a considerably less active black campus. Watching the students at Fisk, she became excited. Smith, however, felt she was unable to participate in the movement actively. As a mother, Smith grappled with the reality of risking her life in the movement. She believed "to be in the movement, one had to truly be in the movement."[28]Balancing her radical spirit with her duty to motherhood would be a lasting battle for her entire career.

Being a professional black woman came with its own difficulties and limitations. She had to choose between furthering her career and being a mother when she decided to pursue her PHD. While at the University of Illinois (1960-64), the movement in Nashville had spread nationwide. SNCC had gone from a loosely organized committee of part-time student activists to a more radical political movement. King spoke at Fisk seeking inspiration from the campus movement in Nashville in 1960. And by 1964, SNCC had adopted the philosophies of secular thinkers such as Karl Marx, Albert Camus and Malcolm X. This was a discernable shift from the Christian mission at the organization's foundation. A year after the famous March on

[26] Michael D'Orso and John Lewis, *Walking with the wind: a memoir of the* movement (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 95.
[27] Carson, 22
[28] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

Washington, black college students began to speak boldly on policy reform. The face of Nashville's student had been those affiliated with SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Prior to the transition about to take place, leaders such as Diane Nash and John Lewis were considered agitators in Nashville who disrupted the so-called "interracial harmony". Nashville had been advertised as the "Best City in the South for Negroes" in Jet Magazine.[29] Compared to more racially violent places in the south, Nashville was considered the Athens of the South.[30] Although the Nashville movement was successful, they did not necessarily earn the respect of other activists.

The lack of respect was due to the sentiment that Nashville activists did not face the level of violence that their contemporaries in Alabama or Mississippi faced. The later divide in SNCC would be caused by the philosophical division on nonviolence. Some black leaders saw the nonviolence movement as heavily reliant on whites. In the second phase of SNCC, leaders questioned whether the reliance on white support hindered the movement's impact. Although Fisk served as a pivotal HBCU in Nashville, it was also a symbol of the black class's reliance on whites. Fisk, during the Johnson years, received financial support from whites and had an amicable relationship with the white community. While TSU had black presidents, Fisk would be led by a predominantly white board of trustees. Even in Johnson's tenure, the Fisk Board of Trustees were still mainly white. In fact, the choice to make Johnson president was an indicator to some alumni that he was willing to compromise with the white board. W.E.B Du Bois notably all-out protested Johnson's hire due to his large white philanthropic backing. So, it was no coincidence that Fisk students would become troubled that their "black campus" was not one at all.

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[29] D'Orso and Lewis, 192.
[30] Ibid, 81.

The culture at Fisk was known as one that would prioritize its financial future over its fight for civil rights. President Wright inherited an institution that had lost the support of Johnson's donors. Fisk entered a period of financial hardship due to the lack of a clear focus. Johnson was not transparent with subordinates about his plans, and Wright had to rely on his experience to remodel the institution's budget.[31] Wright differed from Johnson in how to run a black college. Jessie Smith said of the sentiment of Fisk administration at that time, "Fisk did not want to be called an HBCU or a black college back then." In Wright, Fisk had a black president who was willing to be outspoken about civil rights. He did not shy away from supporting protests publicly. During the sit-in movement, he publicly endorsed the student activists on campus. Wright even told the media, "I approve the ends our students are seeking through these demonstrations".[32] He even managed to get the support from the board of trustees, who had traditionally been hesitant to support such demonstrations.

One reason Fisk was motivated to take a more active stance in the movement was because of the Z. Alexander Looby bombing. The attempted assassination of Looby in 1960, a Nashville lawyer and faculty member at Fisk, not only damaged his home but it affected the nearby Meharry Medical College. Jessie Smith was at Fisk while Looby had be an instructor. She was familiar with Looby, and she had worked with his wife. During the time of the sit-ins, Smith cited this as the most fearful she had been during her entire career. As a member of the local Clark Memorial Church, she recalled members fearing for their lives. As a station for nonviolence training for SNCC and SCLC, Smith's church was a hub for the black student movement. Aware of the bombing of black churches, Smith said, "If you went to church, whites could kill you. You didn't even feel safe at church."[33] Under the Wright administration, Smith

[31] Gilpin and Gasman. *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 235.
[32] "Fisk Trustees Back Prexy's Sit-in View," The Chicago Defender, May 14, 1960.
[33] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

admired the vocal faculty. At Fisk, faculty tended to get things done. Wright understood the movement and encouraged not just students but faculty to get involved. However, the movement would later shift in tone. While the Fisk administration defended the non-violent and peaceful protests, they would take a different stance in the coming years.

Wright's tenure reflected the principles of King and his evolving attitudes toward race and policy. Starting in 1957, Wright experienced a movement that promoted peaceful protests, nonviolence, and patient strategy. Well, by the end of Wright's tenure in 1966, the movement was more energized and had mobilized young people on Fisk's campus. Although the movement had always seen youth involvement, the growing Black Power Movement would see more aggressive student participation. Jessie Smith's first year as university librarian, in 1965, the campus had already taken a new look. The campus had benefited from Wright's achievements in enrollment, fundraising, and his development of STEM departments.[34] Wright was able to help Fisk continue to get external financial support. As the successor to famed and popular president Charles S. Johnson, Wright worked with Arna Bontemps to continue building on the black collection in the library. During Smith's nine months, the library received a $1,500 grant to process the Charles S. Johnson papers.[35] Smith would define Wright as "outspoken and unafraid to speak publicly on issues of race". And although she was never asked for input on administrative matters, she admired that Wright refused to take a backseat locally. The Nashville that Smith came into had changed and there is no greater symbol of the movement in Nashville than John Lewis.

JOHN LEWIS:

[34]"Dr. Wright Quits as Fisk Prexy", *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1966.
[35] Owens, 148.

American Baptist College and Fisk University alum, John Lewis was one of the leaders of SNCC and SCLC in the early 1960s. Organizer of the Freedom Rides, Lewis was a staunch figure in the Nashville civil rights movement. While a student at American Baptist College, he recalled Fisk as a campus that annually hosted scholarly gatherings, and these would host both blacks and whites.[36] Although Lewis recognized that Nashville was still in the Jim Crow south, he saw Nashville as having a strong black middle-class. In addition to that, Nashville had a strong NCAAP chapter. In what was then considered a progressive city, Nashville had potential for a strong black presence. For Lewis, this made Nashville a place of unique opportunity. Lewis had noticed a shift in the students in Nashville by the end of the 1950s. The previously mentioned President Wright had noticeably shifted his tone by the mid-to late 60s.

In contrast to Jessie Smith's opinion of Wright, Lewis's first impression of Wright was that he was "cautious".[37] Smith likely developed her opinion of Wright once she came back to Nashville in 1963. Ironically, in 1959, Freshman college students were chanting "Free by 63", signaling their awareness of the movement. When Smith came back to Nashville, SNCC and civil rights activists were growing frustrated with the Kennedy administration. Due to the violence down south, they advocated for federal protection during civil rights protests. In the summer of 1963, Lewis led demonstrations in Nashville. The demonstrations would inspire more and more crowds, however, the urban black community appeared more militant. Since Lewis had recently become chairman of SNCC, he met with President Kennedy and several other civil rights strategists.

Although the Kennedy administration had submitted new civil rights legislation, civil rights leaders felt that there was still a lack of urgency. Black Americans had become

[36] D'Orso and Lewis, 81.
[37] Ibid, 109.

accustomed to the Kennedy administration treading the waters. Although progressive, Kennedy's civil rights proposals lacked protection for civil rights leaders and protesters. Lewis and SNCC felt that Kennedy did not use his powers to prevent police brutality and voter intimidation.[38] Violence throughout the country had spread to disincentive voting, and civil rights demonstrations. Jessie Smith says of the period, "I was afraid then. I recall having to go to a meeting for SACS in Mississippi. I had to go through Memphis. I tried everything in my power to not go."[39] Her fear demonstrated the level of danger that African Americans faced traveling in the South. Her affiliation with Fisk undoubtedly made her a target for southern racist groups, especially as a black professional. Like for John Lewis, Nashville served as a safer option for activism. And in her case, as a scholar activist, seeing the movement take shape would define her activism going forward.

In Smith's first year as Fisk librarian, the famous Bloody Sunday took place in Selma, Alabama. Unquestionably one of the most symbolic faces of Bloody Sunday was Lewis. The assault by state troopers on the Edmund Pettis bridge serves as one of the most significant images in the civil rights movement. However, the story behind the march from Selma to Montgomery is a key indicator of where the movement was heading. SNCC was becoming more militant at this time. By 1965, Diane Nash was no longer a member of SNCC, and the organization had taken a more militant approach. There was a divide brewing between SNCC and the SCLC. At one point the leaders of both organizations often worked in conjunction with another. Besides, it was Ella Baker, SCLC director that formed the SNCC group that started the Greensboro sit-ins. However, the Edmund Pettis bridge saw a lack of communication between both parties. King's participation in the march was controversial among members of SNCC.

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[38] Carson, 87
[39] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

For SNCC, the march was to protest the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, an unarmed 26-year-old protester. SNCC eventually agreed to march with King because they wanted to counteract the SCLC's influence.[40] One of the reasons for the divide amongst leaders of SNCC and SCLC was that young leaders viewed the SCLC as media activist, whereas SNCC looked at themselves as foot soldires. While King initially saw SNCC being an extension of the SCLC, SNCC leaders would be an independent organization. Although SNCC was a proponent of nonviolence, they looked to mobilize campuses and challenge the establishment. The establishment would eventually include the White House, King and the SCLC, and even campus administrations.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL

Jessie Smith admired the strategy and approach of the student sit-in activists. She was a staunch advocate of a Christian led movement which is why her opinion of more extreme thinkers is crucial to understanding her evolution as a scholar. As a student at the University of Illinois, Smith remembered Malcolm being invited to campus. She did not attend because she felt that he was too radical. In contrast to King, Malcolm was seen as a nightmare for both whites and working-class blacks. Smith felt that Malcom was a bit radical, and his rhetoric seemed divisive. In a movement that aimed for racial unity, Malcolm was in opposition to that. Inspired by Garveyism and minister for the Nation of Islam, he was seen as the counter to King. African Americans, particularly in the South, were predominantly Christian. Therefore, their political strategies reflected their religion and faith. Leaders of the movement were often Christian preachers, and ministers at middle-class churches.

[40] Carson, 160-62.

During the 60s, while the national mantra had been nonviolence, the Nation of Islam believed in self-defense and black separatism. If King was seen as the face of the freedom struggle in the south, Malcolm was indicative of the poor black class in the North.[41] At the height of Civil Rights movement, Malcolm denounced the nonviolence movement and its Christian leadership. So, there was no surprise that while King had spoken at Fisk on multiple occasions, Malcolm was never invited. During the peak of Malcolm X's notoriety, it was common to see him speaking at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). PWIs were fascinated by the radical, and black nationalists' viewpoints, specifically his separatist approach.

As one of the most polarizing, and thought-provoking civil rights leaders of the time, Malcolm had a way with the young intellectuals. HBCUs, specifically Christian-centered HBCUs, feared that Malcolm would agitate their Christian campuses. Well, by the time of Malcolm's death, the movement was starting take a new tone. Even King would begin to promote more radical stances. Malcolm's death left a profound impact on young people. Black college students would become inspired by Malcolm and his refusal to negotiate or compromise. As it pertains to Jessie Smith's career, the arrival of Stokely Carmichael at Fisk was a sign that times were truly changing.

Stokely Carmichael had been a member of SNCC in the 1960s. A graduate of Howard University in 1964, he was mentored by the movement. Howard, like Fisk University, built a legacy of training black professionals but struggled with their place in the movement. Howard had to be cautious of not agitating donors who supported their large African and Caribbean students. At Howard, Carmichael would join Howard's SNCC affiliate the Nonviolent Action

[41] James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: a dream or a nightmare* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 47-51.

Group (NAG).[42] In 1961, Carmichael was a member of the Mississippi Freedom Riders. During those rides, he would be arrested and jailed for forty-nine days. Carmichael spent several summers in the South, hoping to inspire those at Howard to engage in the movement. Once he graduated, Carmichael became a full-fledged organizer. As a member of SNCC, Carmichael was the most captivating young member. He would form what would later be known as the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama. Although he admired King as a man, he did not agree with what he symbolized. King was a symbol of the old regime of civil rights leaders who took all the press. He and fellow SNCC member believed that while they got the media attention, they were the shock troops of the movement.[43]

By 1965, it was clear that SNCC was an independent organization. And by 1966, Carmichael took over as chair of SNCC from John Lewis. Lewis cited that there were internal differences that led to his departure. SNCC became an organization that he could no longer recognize. In the local newspaper, they also cite that Lewis was returning to school to finish his degree at Fisk.[44] With Carmichael in charge, Black Power became the slogan of SNCC. He was a more radical and confrontational leader of SNCC. In comparison to Lewis, Carmichael relished confrontations with media and political officials. The catchy "Black Power" slogan became popular amongst young people. Smith noticed a discernable shift in leadership at Fisk as well. President Wright would resign on June 30, 1966.[45] 1966 also marked the 100th year celebration of Fisk, During Wright's administration, Fisk had doubled the salaries of its faculty and increased its annual budget by over a million dollars.[46]

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[42] Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the midnight hour: a narrative history of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 126.
[43] Joseph, *Waiting 'til the midnight hour*, 127-28.
[44] "Two SNCC Leaders Axed in Shakeup: John Lewis, James Forman are Replaced." Chicago *Daily Defender),* May 18, 1966.
[45] "Dr. Wright Quits as Fisk Prexy", *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1966.
[46] Ibid.

After his resignation from Fisk, he became president of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF).[47] Wright left Fisk in good hands. James Lawson became Fisk University's 8th president in 1967, and he was the first Fisk alumni to hold the position. Prior to his presidency, he was a professor of Physics. Graduating in 1935, Lawson was the first Fisk student to graduate with a degree in Physics. Before joining the Fisk faculty, Lawson was chair of the Tennessee State physics department from 1955-57.[48] Similar to Jessie Smith, he had experienced both HBCU campuses. Tennessee State differed from Fisk because faculty were encouraged to not speak out of fear of government retaliation. Lawson inherited a campus unlike the one he had known in 1957. Fisk students who traditionally had been militant in civil rights were beginning to become militant on campus.

Stokely Carmichael's arrival in Nashville would encourage further student dissent on campus. He was a known radical, and he was a threat to the supposed racial harmony in the city.[49] Nashville whites were not the only ones opposed to his arrival. Nashville's black middle class were not as militant as those in the movement. Some of them believed that black power was detrimental to their livelihoods. Although Mayor Ben West was for the desegregation of lunch counters during the sit-ins, mayor Beverly Briley did not like idea of outside agitators. Going all the way back to Charles S. Johnson's day at Fisk, Nashville whites always believed that they had race relations under control. The idea of a radical leader that was less compromising than those of the SCLC was frightening. Because of the reliance on white philanthropists, Fisk faculty had been hesitant to invite Carmichael to campus. Jessie Smith was not asked or consulted about Carmichael's arrival, but she would have supported it. She had met with Carmichael at mutual

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[47] "Stephen Wright, 85; Led Education for Blacks", New York *Times*, April 19, 1996
[48] Crystal DeGregory, "James Rayford Lawson" in *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee* (Nashville: Annual Local Conference on Afro-American Culture and History), 159-60.
[49] Scott Frizzell, "Not Just a Matter of Black and White: The Nashville Riot of 1967," *The Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 70, no.1 (Spring 2011): 38.

friend's home. They made sure to meet outside of Jefferson Street to keep a low profile. During the meeting, she said that Carmichael was tired due to all the travel and demonstrations he had led that year. Leaving that meeting, Smith was excited about his coming to Fisk. Carmichael intended on visiting TSU, Fisk, and Vanderbilt while in Nashville. He had met with Nashville community leaders in March to plan his visit.

On April 6, 1967, Carmichael met with Fisk students and discussed topics that ranged from the ongoing Vietnam war to black political struggle in Nashville. At Fisk, he wore a Black Power T-shirt and spoke in the campus gymnasium.[50] He was aware of the class struggle among Black Nashvillians. His engagements at both Fisk and TSU would be symbolic of the unification that would occur on the night of April 8th. Earlier that day Carmichael spoke at Vanderbilt. At Vanderbilt, he had a considerably milder tone. At Vanderbilt, he appeared in a suit and tie with a composed demeanor.

His strategic appearances may have had something to do with the local newspapers. The Nashville Banner, considered a more favorable paper for black Nashvillians, was attempting to incite fear amongst the community.[51] Editor of the banner, James Stahlman, wanted to deter Carmichael from speaking at Vanderbilt. As a member of the board of trustees, he felt that Carmichael would inspire black students to disrupt the peace. So, the paper that Jessie Smith and other middle-class Blacks would read in the afternoon would prove to be an unreliable source. His worst nightmare would occur the evening of April 8th. Carmichael's appearances at both Fisk and TSU may not have directly cause the riot on Jefferson Street but his motivational address successively unified the two divided institutions. While white Nashvillians wanted to push the

[50] Jennifer Hendricks, "Stokely Carmichael and the 1967 IMPACT Symposium: Black Power, White Fear, Conservative South," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 63, no.4 (Winter 2004): 295.
[51] Hendricks, "Stokely Carmichael and the 1967 IMPACT Symposium: Black Power, White Fear, Conservative South," 291-98.

narrative that Carmichael was responsible for the riots, the riots were more indicative of black Nashvillians working together.

Smith lived on Clarksville Highway, roughly five miles from Fisk and Meharry. Her home was closer to TSU; however, she was concerned that the riots could lead near her home. She was afraid, as a single mother, she had no idea what the results of the riots would be. The riot was initially a dispute between a student and the University dinner club.[52] The dismissal of the student led to an uprising at the center of campus. Fisk Students claimed they were simply protesting, however, over 150 police ensued.[53] Nashville police assumed that Carmichael had staged a violent uprising. They wrongfully detained and harassed students. Fisk student president Louis Outlaw maintained that the riots were at the fault of the Metro police.[54] Furthermore, Fisk students actively denounced the reporting in the papers. The papers insisted that Carmichael looked to incite violence.

Even though Carmichael had spoken about a wide range of issues, Nashville wanted to paint him as a violent radical. However, they only created what they were seemingly trying to prevent. By creating a disastrous spectacle on Jefferson, they converted an otherwise centered student body to a campus of black power. There was a presence of black power on the campus, but only by a minority. After the Carmichael appearance, Smith saw the campus transform. Reflecting on her old college days, she said that the campus queen at Fisk shouldered more responsibilities. Fisk students saw themselves as activists. Arguably Carmichael's greatest implication was that whites ran the administration.[55] President Lawson and the Board of trustees were under scrutiny. Students wandered why the board was so white, and why the university

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[52] Hendricks, 298-299; Frizzell, "Not Just a Matter of Black and White: The Nashville Riot of 1967," 36-37.
[53] Ibid, 299.
[54] Hendricks, 298; *Fisk Herald*, April 14, 1967
[55] Ben Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 168-69; Hitchens, 295.

relied so heavily on white support. Although Lawson was an advocate for the civil rights movement, he did not approve of the new attitudes of some students. Still, there was a large portion of students who felt that the black power demonstrations were detrimental to the institution. Lawson felt that the difference between the new student activists and their predecessors was that these students were disruptors.[56] Like the students, Smith wanted Fisk to take pride in being a Black University. A label they had distanced themselves from for years, students demanded that the campus reflect blackness. Smith recalls students with afros everywhere. She saw that all the girls were wearing them, and it even inspired her to do the same. However, the afro represented militancy, and although Smith was in support of students being militant, she could not afford to risk her reputation.

Lawson would lose some white donors during the emergence of black power on campus.[57] Smith was not affected by this because the library never relied on institutional funding. During the Lawson years, she would rely heavily on outside support. Smith would develop a relationship with Nikki Giovanni during this time. Giovanni would later become a renowned writer and poet, but Smith knew her young. She would invite students over to her home. The students used to refer to her home as the Dark Tower, a reference to the Harlem Renaissance.[58] Jessie Smith may not have envisioned herself as active, but she had her fingerprints all over Fisk. The Dark Tower in the Harlem Renaissance was the nickname for A'Lelia Walker's home and salon. It was famous for being a place that hosted writers and creatives. Like Walker, Smith served as a home for young scholars at Fisk. Smith was not a foot

[56] James R. Lawson. "Student Participation in Educational Change." *The Journal of Negro Education* 40, no. 3 (1971): 282.
[57] DeGregory, "James Rayford Lawson", 159-60; Lawson, "Student Participation in Educational Change," 282-289
[58] Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 18, 2023

soldier, but she was an incubator for black scholarship. In the years that followed the Nashville riot, she would spend five decades preserving this period in her career.