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The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field

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“By all rights, there no longer should be much question about the meaning —at least the intended meaning—of Black Power,” the journalist Charles Sutton observed in January 1967. “Between the speeches and writings of

Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),” Sutton continued, “the explanations of Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the writings of more than a score of scholars and commentators, the slogan and its various assumptions have been fairly thoroughly examined.”¹

...

Clearly Sutton was wrong. Despite efforts to define it both then and today, “black power” exists in the American imagination through a series of iconic, yet fleeting images—ranging from gun-toting Black Panthers to black-gloved sprinters at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics—that powerfully evoke the era's confounding mixture of triumph and tragedy. Indeed, the iconography of Stokely...

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