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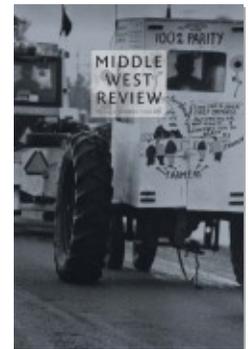
*Free Radical: Ernest Chambers, Black Power, and the Politics of Race* by Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson (review)

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Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson, *Free Radical: Ernest Chambers, Black Power, and the Politics of Race*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$39.95.

For nearly a half century, Omaha's Ernest "Ernie" Chambers has served in the Nebraska legislature as a representative of Nebraska's eleventh district, the lone predominately African American legislative district in all of Nebraska. Operating with the self-designated title of "Defender of the Downtrodden," Chambers has become a Nebraska institution. A black, militant, progressive, urban, agnostic leader in a white-dominated, rural, conservative state, Chambers has often been viewed by his opponents as a menacing radical. To his supporters, meanwhile, he seems to be a voice crying in the wilderness. Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson's *Free Radical* is the first book length attempt to analyze Chambers's long, fascinating (and still ongoing) career.

For the most part *Free Radical* follows a chronological path, tracing Chambers's trajectory from being "the leading Black Nationalist in Middle America" to becoming "one of the region's most influential statesmen" (219). As a political biography, *Free Radical* focuses on Chambers's public activities, generally setting aside any analysis or discussion of Chambers's personal life and only occasionally delving into the ideological sources from which he drew inspiration. Johnson specifically cites John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) as an influence on her work, noting that she follows his path in approaching the study of the civil rights and Black Power movements as "organic efforts by communities with multiple independent and (paradoxically) interdependent nuclei" (3). This emphasis on the particularities of place is strongest early in the book and tends to fade to the background elsewhere as Chambers's words and activities take center stage.

Johnson has plenty of fascinating material with which to work. Before Chambers took his place in the Nebraska Unicameral, he was a barber and a leading black activist in Omaha. His prominence among Omaha's African Americans and his charisma earned him a star turn in the acclaimed documentary film *A Time for Burning* (1967), which first brought Chambers to national prominence. *LIFE* magazine remarked at the time that he was an "astonishingly articulate black nationalist." Chambers's activism continued after his election to the Nebraska Unicameral in 1970. He used his position in the state legislature to criticize police brutality, push for Nebraska to divest from South Africa, end capital punishment, and more. Many of the causes that Chambers took up decades ago—such as support

for gay rights and for paying NCAA football players—have only recently gained mainstream appeal. So, too, in the wake of Ferguson and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Chambers’s longstanding criticism of racist police tactics seems even more prescient.

Perhaps surprisingly, religion plays an important role in *Free Radical*. Raised in a fundamentalist Christian home, Chambers eventually rejected that dogmatism in favor of a different sort of moral zealousness, one freed from the moorings of organized religion. Despite rejecting the divine inspiration of the Bible, throughout his political career Chambers has turned to the Bible—particularly its calls for inclusiveness, caring for the poor, and mercy—to critique his opponents. In some ways, Chambers’s attitudes about religion are similar to another famous progressive from Nebraska, George Norris. Both Norris and Chambers rejected organized religion (Norris much less stridently than Chambers) while maintaining a firm commitment to justice and human rights. Also like Norris—in fact, even more so—in politics Chambers has remained fiercely independent.

According to Johnson, Chambers’s independence is one reason that black political activity has tended to be less centralized in Omaha compared to other midwestern cities. For example, while many African Americans in Kansas City organized around Freedom Incorporated, in Omaha “personal allegiance to Chambers” became a source of black political identity (74). Chambers’s independence and his unwillingness to create or build organizations has drawn criticism, even from those who admire his work. Johnson, though, views Chambers’s independence as a strength. Combined with the peculiarities of Nebraska’s unicameral system, it enabled Chambers to remain a powerful voice for black nationalism even as many of the radical black leaders from the 1960s (those who survived) dulled their sharper critiques in order to move into the two party political mainstream.

It is clear that Johnson, who grew up in north Omaha, reveres Chambers. When discussing an admiring letter that Chambers received from Mona Bazaar, for example, Johnson writes that Bazaar was attracted to “Chambers’s courage and dedication to the people” and that “she would not be the only woman to feel this way.” Chambers, however, was a “busy, but devoted husband” who was “too engrossed in planning or countering each new bill to be overly flattered” (86). Undoubtedly, Chambers deserves to be recognized as one of the most important political leaders in the late twentieth century Midwest. But the reverent tone for Chambers and the tendency to quickly

move past the potentially less flattering episodes in Chambers's career ultimately hinder the depth of analysis that Johnson provides.

Even so, by documenting the long career of the most powerful black leader in Nebraska, Johnson has provided an important contribution to the study of politics and African American life in Nebraska and the Midwest. Here's hoping that Johnson's word on Chambers will not be the last and that scholars of midwestern history in particular will take note of the "Maverick of Omaha."

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Ted Kooser, *Splitting an Order*. Port Townsend, Wash.:  
Copper Canyon Press, 2014. 87 pp. \$23.00.

Ever since Ted Kooser's first collection of poetry appeared in 1969, it has become increasingly difficult, perhaps now impossible, to imagine contemporary American literature without his voice. Over the course of his career, he has published eleven collections of poetry and several works of nonfiction, including such familiar titles as *The Blizzard Voices* (1986), *Weather Central* (1994), *Braided Creek* (2003), and most recently, *Delights and Shadows* (2004), which won the Pulitzer Prize. Kooser was our National Poet Laureate from 2004–6—notably, he was the first person from the Great Plains to hold the office—and he currently edits the popular syndicated newspaper column, "American Life in Poetry."

His latest book, *Splitting an Order*, is full of moments that are recognizable to us all. At times, these tightly crafted and precise poems feel like an homage to the everyday and familiar. To read these poems is to see throwaway moments cast in a new light. Kooser is rightfully known for his clear-eyed observational powers, and in page after page of his new collection we encounter little moments that carry the grandeur of life itself—as a poet, he encourages us to watch the unspooling of time around us. His subject matter ranges from watching an elderly couple split an order at a local restaurant, to a woman rollerblading past him, to a moment on a country road where a car stops and the driver and passenger switch roles for the long journey ahead, to a zinc lid at the back of a dark garage.

Kooser's poems invite us to look at the world around us and, in this