



Free Radical: Ernest Chambers, Black Power, and the Politics of Race (Plains Histories)

Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson

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Amid the deadly racial violence of the 1960s, an unassuming student from a fundamentalist Christian home in Omaha emerged as a leader and nationally recognized black activist. Ernest Chambers, elected to the Nebraska State Legislature in 1970, eventually became one of the most powerful legislators the state has ever known. As Chambers bids for reelection in 2012 to the office he held for thirty-eight years, Omaha native Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson illuminates his embattled career as a fiercely independent defender of the downtrodden. Tracing the growth of the Black Power Movement in Nebraska and throughout the U.S., Johnson discovers its unprecedented emphasis on electoral politics. For the first time since Reconstruction, voters catapulted hundreds of African American community leaders into state and national political arenas. Special-interest groups and political machines would curb the success of aspiring African American politicians, just as urban renewal would erode their geographical and political bases, compelling the majority to join the Democratic or Republican parties. Chambers was one of few not to capitulate. In her revealing study of one man and those he represented, Johnson portrays one intellectual's struggle alongside other African Americans to actualize their latent political power.

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