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Review Essay
Does the Movement Need a King?

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Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2014, $29.99). Pp 399. ISBN 978 0 4650 1363 0.

Not every book sent for review comes with two pages of endorsements from the great and the good. *Stokely* is accompanied by glowing approval from such familiar names as Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, Robin D. G. Kelley, Michael Eric Dyson, Gerald Horne, Charles Oglethorpe, and David Levering Lewis. Even without the paratextual apparatus to guide one's judgement, however, there is enough in this biography of Stokely Carmichael for any scholar of the civil rights movement to relish. This may not be the "definitive biography" that John Stauffer declares it to be, but it is indisputably important. In essence, Joseph argues that Stokely is the missing panel in a triptych of heroes, flanked on either side by the already canonized Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. In key respects, he insists, Stokely was the synthesis of Malcolm and Martin.

The older heroes were both slain at the age of thirty-nine whereas in his later incarnation as Kwame Ture, Stokely was granted eighteen years more before dying of cancer aged fifty-seven in his adopted homeland of Guinea. Joseph deals with the years after 1968 in a single forty-one-page chapter within a text of over 320 pages. In contrast, seven out of fourteen chapters (well over half the book) chronicle the period from April 1965 to December 1968, the mesmerizing mid-twenties of Stokely's life. Realizing that Stokely Carmichael was barely twenty-five in June 1966, when he transfixed the media with the cry of "Black Power," is a startling reminder. The publicity for Joseph's book references Carmichael's "rock-star image," and, like many a star, Stokely's hold on the popular imagination proved fleeting (less than three years). One challenge, therefore, is to persuade us that Stokely deserves more than a passing mention in the "long civil rights movement," and consigning the post-1968 decades to one chapter underscores the magnitude of that task.

The "long civil rights movement" school of historiography articulated by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall raises other questions.[1] It insists that the dominant narrative is fundamentally flawed by its narrow periodization and, still more perniciously, by its politically

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[1] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91 (2005) 1233–63.

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damaging sense of closure. From King Day to civil rights tourism, there is a myth (what Glenn Eskew neatly calls the "Won Cause") that places the civil rights struggle in the past.[2] As a major advocate of black power studies, Joseph has stressed the importance of the 1970s within the long civil rights movement, insisting that this decade, certainly as much as its exalted predecessor, marked the vital phase of an unfinished black power struggle.[3] For this reason too, the structure of the biography disappoints. At the very least, one expects a fuller answer to the question of how exile affected Carmichael's significance for the unfolding struggle that Joseph acclaims elsewhere.

The biographical approach itself is even more vulnerable to a wider group of revisionists who charge that we have all been too fixated on charismatic leaders, like Malcolm and Martin, and consequently have paid too little attention to the many other people, especially at the local level, whose work was at the heart of what the movement did. If Charles Payne was right decades ago to condemn an earlier scholarship for its fixation on the movement's media-spotlit moments, and if the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC's) own philosophy was about grassroots, group-centred, indigenous leadership, how can a biography of Stokely Carmichael hope to illuminate the real movement?[4]

One role such a biography can play is to enrich our understanding of the complex strands within an organization like SNCC. From its birth in 1960, SNCC was more a constellation of groups than a single organization, and Stokely belonged to the Howard University-based Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), whose approach confirms that a use of nonviolent protest tactics did not require a concomitant commitment to philosophical nonviolence like that espoused by the Nashville students' movement under the tutelage of James Lawson. At Howard, Carmichael belonged to a cluster of activists of Caribbean heritage, notably his lifelong friend Mike Thelwall (Jamaican-born) and Courtland Cox (a fellow Trinidadian). A key intellectual influence on the NAG was an older activist, Bayard Rustin, whom Carmichael already knew from his high-school days in New York City. Joseph recounts that Rustin's showmanship, as much as his vibrant intellect, prompted Stokely to tell his friend Gene Dennis that he was going to be a leader like Rustin when he grew up (14). But while Joseph skilfully relates these early influences, his assertion that Stokely quickly "became a leader among equals" is justified more by references to Stokely's personal charm and charisma than by evidence of actions that show that Carmichael "transformed" Howard (29). In early 1961, as plans for the Freedom Rides developed, Carmichael was as much follower as leader within NAG. He was not in the first wave of riders south in May, but joined a NAG group of seven in June testing desegregation at the train station in New Orleans, and then Jackson, Mississippi. Arrested and transferred to the infamous Parchman Prison, Carmichael

[2] Glenn Eskew, *The Won Cause: Memorializing the Movement through the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute* (Atlanta: Georgia State University Press, 1998).

[3] Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010).

[4] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

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caught the attention of his future SNCC colleague and rival John Lewis because of his "knack for starting an argument and for winning it" (34).

Back at Howard that fall, Stokely witnessed a dramatic debate between Rustin and Malcolm X, and dated not just his but NAG's conversion to nationalism to this event. Joseph acknowledges that at the time Carmichael continued to work hard on the Route 40 desegregation protests that Malcolm had declared pointless, but he chooses not to highlight the discrepancy between fact and his subject's autobiographical claims. Stokely's involvement in SNCC intensified in June 1962 when he went to Greenwood, Mississippi, where he revealed a gift for organizing, rooted in his rapport with local people. Joseph mentions how Stokely bonded with the important female local leaders of the Mississippi movement, like Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray and Annie Devine. An indefatigable worker, he returned to college "exhausted, exhilarated, and transformed" (49).

The following spring saw Stokely take a leading role in NAG's protest against the use of segregated union labour in the construction of Howard's new gym, despite an executive order banning their use on projects involving federal grants and contracts. Victory here encouraged NAG to become more involved in the unfolding movement in Cambridge, Maryland, a confrontation which, like the more celebrated Birmingham campaign, forced a reluctant Kennedy administration to introduce civil rights legislation in June 1963. The high point of Carmichael's experience that summer, Joseph stresses, was not the March on Washington, but the Freedom Vote in Mississippi. "Two years ago," Stokely reported proudly, "we would have been shot for a stunt like this" (57). Local organizing, rather than nonviolent protest, was proving Carmichael's métier. Given Stokely's absence from the 28 August March, Joseph's four-page summary of the event seems more intended to accommodate his judgement on that day of contradictions beginning with Malcolm X's dismissal of the Kennedy bill as "too little too late" and ending with the author's encomium for Martin Luther King as a "genuine prophet" (61).

Skilfully, Joseph lays out a basis for seeing Stokely as Martin and Malcolm's synthesis, even while explaining that in September 1963 young Stokely entered his senior year at Howard. In early November, a conference there gave Carmichael the chance to voice his preference for tactically limited nonviolence in the same forum as Martin Luther King, who embraced it completely as "the most potent weapon of freedom," but the continuing struggles in Cambridge (where Stokely was hospitalized after being hit by a teargas canister in early May) and the Delta, where he helped to prepare for and run the Freedom Summer project, proved more important testing grounds for Carmichael. By July, he had become something of a "poster boy" for Freedom Summer and the recipient of care packages sent by an ad hoc group of admirers from across the nation. He had also been assigned to drive King around Greenwood during his FBI-guarded, whistle-stop tour of the Delta. Already, local notoriety was being joined by media-induced celebrity and, in the cycle of arrest and vigilante attacks, Carmichael's misgivings about nonviolence deepened.

The failure of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge in Atlantic City in August likewise ended Carmichael's faith in mainstream politics and launched him on a career of independent political organizing. Joseph accepts Stokely's account that the summer experience changed not just SNCC but Carmichael himself. The author also contextualizes Carmichael's over-quoted comment from the Waveland SNCC retreat of late 1964 that the preferred position for women in SNCC was prone, and rightly laments that the jest damaged both Carmichael and SNCC's reputation

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among feminists for years to come. Surprisingly, since he notes it in his general study of black power, Joseph gives only the briefest treatment of Carmichael's emotional collapse when witnessing police violence against demonstrators in Montgomery on 15 March 1965, the night that President Johnson addressed Congress on the need for voting rights legislation (85).[5]

Despite his acute reaction to the Montgomery clashes, Carmichael was back in the field in Lowndes County within two weeks, applying the methods he had learned in the Delta. It was a dangerous assignment. A white activist and housewife, Viola Liuzzo, had been murdered there as she drove Selma marchers back from the Montgomery rally, and in August a white Episcopalian seminarian, Jonathan Daniels, was killed while working with Carmichael on voter registration. The death hit Carmichael hard, but he kept working to launch a new party (90–91). The goal was power in the black majority areas. Already armed in the face of racist violence, the Lowndes County Freedom Party took as its symbol a black panther. The panther, in its leather-jacketed Californian incarnation, would sear itself into the national imagination. Each year in the movement had made things clearer to Stokely. He wanted power for the people, by the ballot if possible, but with the gun if necessary.

By 1966, the departure of others had made SNCC an organization that resonated more with Stokely than with its long-serving chairman, John Lewis, one of the few remaining Nashville students. Joseph treats the marathon meeting that elected Carmichael (an outcome which Lewis has always disputed) in only a few lines (101). What he does stress is that even before the Meredith March in June, Carmichael had sparked controversy by reiterating SNCC's opposition to the Vietnam War and stressing that what black people needed was "political and economic power" (103). The *New York Times* fretted that SNCC remained vulnerable to communist infiltration. With an air of sadness, *Time* predicted that it was headed into a political dead end, and *Newsweek*, too, waxed nostalgic for the noble SNCC of Freedom Summer and was wary of the new radicals (103–4). Thus the press was already poised to respond luridly to the "Black Power" call.

Despite the space devoted to the period after the Meredith March, Joseph's treatment of Carmichael is disappointing, often content to quote Carmichael's autobiographical assessments or coverage and commentary from FBI surveillance reports with little acknowledgement that these sources contain serious biases.[6] Judging by the citations, chapters 9 through 12 derive much of the evidence for the text from Carmichael's coauthored autobiography, Joseph's earlier work, and FBI and State Department sources. Certainly, no biography should neglect its subject's autobiography, but biographers sometimes discover that events followed a slightly different course than their subject remembered. Equally, security services provide invaluable records, especially for someone as globally peripatetic as Carmichael became after 1967. However, the acute bias of organizations like Hoover's FBI and the beleaguered White House by the time of Carmichael's antiwar calls is well known. Their agents were primed to record remarks that confirmed their prejudices against "anti-American" radicals. The circulation of these reports affirmed the presence of a threat that justified the bureau's activities.

[5] Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*.

[6] Stokely Carmichael (with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell), *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

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In a footnote to chapter 10, Joseph distinguishes his account of Carmichael's role from that offered by Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin.[7] In Joseph's view, Stokely was America's "most important antiwar protester" in the period from June 1966 to April 1967, the one who explicitly linked Vietnam to black power and to a wider anti-imperialist critique before the Black Panthers did: "in short, Carmichael's rhetoric and politics proved the most generative for radicals who were part of the antiwar, Black Power, New Left, Pan-Africanist, and Third World anti-imperialist movements" (346). This amplifies Joseph's other claims that Stokely acceded to the political role last occupied by Malcolm X, whose "critique of American democracy rarely made headlines" whereas Carmichael's became the centre of national controversy (126). Outstripping Malcolm and certainly ahead of King in his condemnation of the Vietnam War, Stokely is thus a hero who has not received the recognition that he deserves.

What is well documented here is that Carmichael fascinated the media and that his personal charm and eloquence made him a star. Stokely's insistence that African American leaders should frame their words in a way that no longer took account of negative white reactions, his analysis linking domestic inequalities to global injustices, and his central demand for self-determination became central aspects for other leaders who eschewed the tainted world of electoral politics. Joseph acknowledges that as early as August 1966, SNCC colleagues were unhappy with how Carmichael's celebrity status placed him outside the checks and balances of the SNCC executive, isolating him from its group-centred leadership, and he notes that SNCC's strength declined as Carmichael's fame grew (139). Yet he does not pause to see whether this might diminish our appreciation of Stokely's style.

At various points, Joseph reiterates Carmichael's claim that he was at heart an organizer (322), yet does not reflect on how fragile the organizations were in which Carmichael took the lead. Having diminished SNCC, Carmichael did not positively enhance the organizing, as distinct from mobilizing, potential of the Black Panther Party. Many of the BPP's local welfare projects date from after his departure. He added to the party's notoriety more than to its strength. If Carmichael (along with SNCC) deserves praise for an early condemnation of US involvement in Vietnam, surely he also warrants scrutiny as a strategist devising plans to strengthen antiwar organizations; popularizing the slogan "Hell No, We Won't Go!" does not add up to a strategy. If Stokely, in his life as Kwame Ture, embodied the internationalization of the struggle that Malcolm had extolled in his final year, it was again a struggle marked more often by symbolic gestures than by effective actions by the Black United Front. As a "professional activist for a revolutionary movement" (278), Carmichael had very few revolts, let alone revolutions, to his name by the 1980s when internal upheavals toppled his patrons in Guinea. Joseph is clearly torn between his hopes for a hero and the facts in the closing pages of the book. The time that allowed Stokely to reach political maturity, he writes, "came at a high cost, removing him from domestic racial struggles and curtailing his political influence" (320–21). Yet even while he concedes that Stokely turned a blind eye to the internal corruption of African nations, Joseph feels that such failings have to be placed in the context of continuing US government harassment. Yet the accusations

[7] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

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of treason and political demands for Carmichael's deportation and arrest do not in themselves justify Stokely's acceptance of the patronage of dictators from Libya to Uganda. The political changes that have come to the Mississippi Delta, to Lowndes County, Alabama to Washington, DC or Oakland, California owe more to the people who stayed to fight than to the exile who continued to extol a pan-Africanist revolution.

Stokely's life was more than a two-word slogan delivered to rapturous crowds, and Joseph's account shows the moral arc that led him to and from the call for black power. But it does not overturn the impression that Carmichael was made by the movement and then placed in a public role with expectations that he could not fulfil. In this respect, he may belong with Malcolm and Martin, but not in the same rank.

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