

David W Fletcher, October 2002

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CHANA KAI LEE'S *FOR FREEDOM'S SAKE:*
THE LIFE OF FANNIE LOU HAMER

Lee's "somewhere in between" approach to the life of civil rights activist Hamer, neither "complete victimization" nor "complete triumph over all odds" (xi), is nebulous and unhelpful. Better is her focus on "pain" as a major theme in Hamer's work and life (180-181), but Lee hardly develops a thoroughgoing theodicy in this biography (unfortunately, she raises this issue about pain much too late, only in her conclusion). Regardless, Lee's narrative shows the violence, internal class divisions, and the progress associated with the American Civil Rights Movement (CRM). In this respect, Lee writes a sociopolitical history of CRM through the eyes of Ms. Hamer and her fellow collaborators in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a view that is micro history but authentic history. To do so, Lee relies on an assortment of sources: government documents, interviews, newspapers, oral histories, periodicals, personal letters and papers, and secondary works that include several unpublished dissertations. Lee makes judicious use of her sources, but always maintains the perspective of Fannie Lou Hamer herself (as is appropriate in biographical narrative). While this "prejudices" the viewpoint, it preserves consistency and readability. Lee also provides, early on, cultural history of life in the Mississippi Delta and the radical consequences of nonconformity.

Lee probably exaggerates the accomplishments of Ms. Hamer, but this also is good biography that brings the subject to the forefront. And she gives an excellent discussion of Hamer's involvement in the Democratic Party at the national level. But Lee omits critical

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analysis of two crucial factors in Hamer's psychological and political formation—her faith and her family. Otherwise, Lee's sagacious work vividly substantiates how the crucible of racial discrimination and violence can spark an energetic, fiery, uncompromising quest for freedom, i.e., the freedom of the human spirit.