



Paul Ortiz. *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xxviii + 382 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23946-3; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25003-1.

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Betrayal in Black and White

In *Emancipation Betrayed*, Paul Ortiz presents the story of black organizers in Florida and their attempts to gain civil rights. He sheds light on the fight against racial oppression rather than on African Americans bending to the will of Jim Crow. This work, then, catalogs the experiences of activists who battled white supremacy and were able to build a network for social justice. For Ortiz, this history has relevance for activists who continually battle racial and ethnic oppression. He writes, “This is a study about how people resist oppression and create new social movements” (p. xvii). His study, however, provides more than a contemporary example of organizing; rather, it challenges previous historiography that suggests the years between Reconstruction and the Great Depression were a “Lost Era of organizing” (p. xix). Rather than trace the struggle for civil rights back to the “New Negro,” who challenged white supremacy in the 1920s, Ortiz traces a deeper history of black organizing to Reconstruction. In this Florida case study, the “New Negro” was quite frankly old by the 1920s. Thus, this narrative of black organizing complicates previous notions of when African Americans began to strategically and collectively challenge white supremacy, while it questions notions of Florida as an exception in the Jim Crow South.

White Floridians embraced Jim Crow and violence to maintain their dominance, much as their brethren did in the rest of the South. The Sunshine State was not different from the rest of the Southern states. Lynching and violence plagued Florida, and Ortiz does not shy away from documenting the brutality of white Floridians and the black resistance to these atrocities. To uplift the voices of black Floridians, Ortiz relies upon print culture, archival sources, and oral history to create his narrative. His work is commendably interdisciplinary, which works well to capture these historical moments and to portray the tangled web of relationships between black and white, black and black, men and women, organizers and voters, busi-

ness owners and the labor force, and politicians and constituents. His reliance upon oral history, with its focus on empowerment and uplift, makes his narrative read as triumphal in spite of the hardship for black Floridians, but I will return to this later.

The work, then, traces black organizing efforts in voter reform and in labor to demonstrate the agency of these organizers in the face of often brutal white dominance. Additionally, this work explores the processes in which African Americans included themselves as citizens of Florida and the nation, from memorialization to restructuring histories to include blacks. Ortiz highlights the black political presence and aspirations at the beginning of Reconstruction, and the attempts of whites to annihilate both. He charts the successes and failures of organizers all over Florida, including the Everglades, Jacksonville, Flagler, Tallahassee, and my native Jackson County. His work also demonstrates that blacks were not just reactionary, but active in asserting their rights and their claims to citizenship. Emancipation, as we know, did not lead to equal civil rights for African Americans, but was only the beginning of a long struggle for civil rights. Ortiz does not just center on the thoughts and actions of blacks in the Jim Crow South. He traces the logic of white Floridians as they attempted to justify denial of rights to African Americans. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe, who moved to Florida in the 1870s, believed that “African American labor and citizenship rights should be subordinated to capital” (p. 29). The “little lady,” who Abraham Lincoln stated had caused the Civil War with her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, supported white business over black civil rights. Ortiz documents the language and actions of white Floridians and how they dehumanized their black counterparts.

What makes Ortiz’s work successful is that he documents how African Americans actively resisted white supremacy through organizing, as well as through

“armed self-help” or “armed self-reliance” (p. 62). In a chapter on lynching, Ortiz notes that Florida had the highest number of lynchings from the 1880s to 1930. The untold story is that black Floridians took up arms and gathered together to prevent lynchings, in the practice of armed self-help. The goal of armed self-help was to avert violence, but Ortiz admits that this practice often caused more violent actions on the behalf of whites. For Ortiz, armed self-help, memorials, and battles over history were all attempts to gain citizenship and, more importantly, to demonstrate that African Americans were citizens that played a role in the history of the state as well as the country.

One theme resonates throughout the work: the agency and dignity of these African Americans. Despite the brutality and the violence, Ortiz wants to show the choices black Floridians had and the choices that they made. Relying upon the work of James Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 1990), Ortiz attempts to show the agency and dignity of black Floridians in spite of violence, the lack of political power, and the historical and contemporary degradation of blacks by whites. Ortiz paints a portrait of brutality, but uplift seems to be his main concern. He writes, “The Florida movement teaches that hitherto powerless individuals may come together to formulate the boldest social justice agendas” (p. 236). For Ortiz, this narrative is not only important because it presents an untold history, but also because it is a shining example of bold initiatives of social justice.

While bold initiatives are important, his expansive agency of his historical actors seems a bit far-reaching. This uplift of agency and dignity is problematic because it occludes whether this organizing was successful or not. Often, the organizing efforts of black Floridians failed or were trampled upon. Blacks were lynched at an astonishing rate in Florida, and Ortiz documents cold-blooded murders, terror tactics, and, more generally, how dehumanizing Jim Crow proved to be for many African Americans. I agree that it is important to show the dignity of these early organizers, but at what historical cost? Does this somehow downplay how nefarious and harmful white supremacy was? Does this focus on dignity suggest that dignity is somehow a human trait that remains in spite of degradation and harm? (This is more a critique of Scott’s theory than Ortiz’s use of it). Moreover, Ortiz’s portrayal of black Floridians implies that agency

is always present, or in other words, people always have the ability to act. His narrative, however, documents the limited choices for action that African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Yes, they could resist, but it was limited, and often these small actions of resistance had terrible consequences. Their agency was not far-reaching as Ortiz seems to suggest.

My additional critique of Ortiz’s work revolves around the role of religion (religious people as well as religious institutions) in black organizing in Florida. As a religious historian by trade, I was somewhat surprised that the religious motivations of black organizers as well as the folks they organized were not analyzed. Ortiz points to the clergy, the use of religious motifs and themes, and the importance of churches without discerning how or why religion aided the struggle for civil rights. In all fairness, this might be because previous works have examined, in much detail, the place of religion in the lives of African Americans. However, I could not help but wonder how the narrative would have been enriched by further reflection upon the role of churches, clergy, and the laity in this organizing movement. How were biblical narratives interpreted to reflect the struggles that these Floridians faced? Why did some ministers support organizing while others suggested passively accepting the status quo? Were people more indebted to this organizing process because it sprang forth from their churches or were there other ties that bound them together? How religion functioned in this movement would have provided more historical resonance with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and would have allowed questions of why one movement was more successful than another if the situations were quite similar.

Overall, *Emancipation Betrayed* is a successful work that highlights the struggle of black Floridians for civil rights. Ortiz’s work is valuable for historians of the U.S. South, American historians more generally, and anyone with an interest in how social movements develop. The contributions of this work, the challenge to the New Negro, and the placement of Florida as a representative of the Jim Crow South, are valuable to both historiography and more general historical knowledge. Questions about the agency and the religiosity of these historical actors remain, but Ortiz’s work provides questions about the nature of black organizing that, I think, complicates previous narratives of the Jim Crow South.

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