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Historical Memory as Sanctuary: Afro-Floridian Folk Diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century

Spanish colonial Florida has served as a corrective to widely held assumptions about the history of the southern United States. The general public continues to paint the South with broad brushstrokes, composing a picture of the regionâs history as the story of stark racial oppression (with clear lines between black and white). However, the dominant historiographical narrative of Spanish Florida is a tale of racial fluidity, agency, and negotiation. Wonderfully articulated in Jane Landersâs *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (1999), Afro-Floridians exploited Spanish policies, due to legal precedent and Catholicism, in order to find avenues to freedom and sociopolitical advancement. However, scholars agree that the United States eventually consolidated its power over the territory, leading to a rigid racial society with little social mobility.

Frank Marottiâs *The Cana Sanctuary: History, Diplomacy, and Black Catholic Marriage in Antebellum St. Augustine, Florida* argues that Spanish Floridaâs legacy extended into the territorial period, later statehood, and created the conditions for continued Afro-Floridian resistance and agency. The traumatic events surrounding the 1812 Patriot War left deep economic and psychological scars that united a close-knit community across racial, gender, and class lines. East Florida residents, in particular from St. Augustine, celebrated the achievements of their black troops in lifting the destructive Patriot siege. This shared historical memory created a favorable climate for the cityâs black population to tout their previous military service and social status, thus winning important concessions in the 1830s and 40s. In particular, access to the Catholic Church and its sacraments of baptism and marriage legitimized Afro-Floridian families and conferred social status upon birth. As a result, slaves increased their chances of preserving their families during an era when this was nearly an impossible task. More broadly speaking, St. Augustineâs black population continued to tap into a longstanding tradition of folk diplomacy (dating back to the First Spanish Florida Period), which exploited the ever-shifting geopolitical situation.

Within a loose chronological approach, the author uses primary sources from the National Archives and local St. Augustine depositories in order to highlight Afro-Floridian agency. At the projectâs core is an insightful analysis of Patriot War claims and testimony produced for the Treasury Department and housed in the National Archives. The Patriot War occurred when the United States commenced covert operations in order to annex East Florida. Georgia volunteers and a small number of the provinceâs Euro-American residents (led by General George Matthews) occupied Amelia Island and laid siege to St. Augustine. Although the invasion failed, it nevertheless scorched the countryside and left the inhabitants destitute. In 1834, Congress authorized compensation for lost property due to the actions of U.S. troops. The ensuing adjudication process yielded a number of testimonies

that shed light on the Patriot War era but also Floridian society during the Second Seminole War (1835-42).

The Patriot War accounts are the basis of the bookâs first five chapters, which largely deal with the war and its impact. The author uses these chapters to establish East Floridaâs prewar prosperity, Euro-American loyalty to Spain, property losses incurred, and the elevated position of blacks in the province. The final two chapters focus on case studies that occurred after the Adam-OnÃs Treaty and the years leading up to the Civil War. In particular, the sixth chapter spotlights Afro-Floridian resistance by drawing attention to the case of Andrew GuÃ©, a slave who escaped to the Bahamas in 1843. The final chapter focuses on black efforts at familial preservation through the use of Catholic sacraments as well as the hidden transcript of Bishop Augustin Verotâs 1861 sermon.

Marotti makes a number of significant points, specifically about East Floridaâs prewar society, Afro-Floridian diplomacy, and the impact of historical memory on black agency. As mentioned above, the book heavily utilizes the Patriot War claims produced in the 1830s. These testimonies present a vibrant and robust portrayal of the East Florida economy prior to the war. This is contrary to the assumption that the colony was essentially a âfailed state.â Conversely, Marotti writes that Euro-American planters and a number of free blacks were prospering by engaging in an extractive economy (timber). In addition, the text buttresses many of Landers', Susan R. Parkerâs, and Daniel L. Shaferâs findings in Landersâ edited collection *Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida*, which demonstrate that the local planters created a diversified economy that included citrus, cattle, and sea island cotton.[1] Marotti also adopts James G. Cusickâs argument, as articulated in his text *The Other War of 1812*, that few inhabitants joined the Patriot rebellion because they were economically ascendant.[2] Thus the wanton destruction of crops, livestock, homes, and other property left resentments among Euro-Americans, whom general readers might have otherwise assumed were only nominal Spanish subjects.

As part of their integration into Spanish Florida society, Euro-Americans recognized the elevated status of Afro-Floridians. Harkening back to the First Spanish Florida Period, blacks had the ability to manumit relatives, own property (including slaves), access the courts, and serve in the military. For example, Philip Edinborough was a landowner with social and economic relationships with his white neighbors. He also served as a sergeant in Prince Wittenâs black company. Witten was the famed commander of the black military unit that successfully ambushed Captain John Williamsâs supply convoy in September 1812. The attack alleviated St. Augustineâs suffering by lifting the Patriotsâ siege of the capital. Wittenâs life, first as a runaway slave entering Florida and later as a converted Catholic and war hero, epitomized the transformation that was possible in East Florida. Witten and his wife Judy had their children baptized and their timber operation helped support the family.

After the U.S. acquired Florida, such individuals as Edinborough and Witten saw an erosion of their civil rights. However, the collective historical memory of their military feats during the Patriot War mitigated the hardening of racial lines. Whites in St. Augustine were incentivized (because of their 1830s Patriot War claims) to promote the legacy of Spanish Florida, which included a history of racial fluidity. As Marotti notes, whites surprisingly spoke about U.S. abuses, free black property ownership, and Afro-Floridian violent resistance, despite living in the shadow of the Second Seminole War. Some slaves, such as GuÃ©, were undoubtedly inspired by tales of black resistance to do the same. In his case, the British Bahamas, rather than Spanish Florida, was now where divergent national policies over slavery could be exploited. However, the majority of blacks turned to more feasible everyday acts of resistance based on a residual affinity for Spanish Florida. Consequently, the Catholic Church established a strong presence in St. Augustine during the late 1830s. A number of slaves turned to the baptismal font and the altar in order to have their families legitimized by âan international body exercising moral suasion over their mastersâ (p. 3). From 1821 to 1867, over eight hundred blacks were baptized and nearly one hundred couples formalized their marriages, almost double the number that occurred in the Second Spanish Florida Period. Even some white elites argued for the sanctity of black marriages, as evidenced in Bishop Verotâs 1861 sermon.

According to Marotti, Verotâs homily was commensurate with his role as an âambassadorâ and âhistorianâ of St. Augustineâs black community (p. 164). However, as the text notes, most white southerners disregarded Verotâs call for benevolent paternalism and instead latched on to his religious justification of slavery. This point epitomizes the classic debate between frameworks that stress agency versus models that analyze oppressive sociopolitical structures. If the sermon modified elitesâ behavior in ways that benefited black families, few concrete examples were offered. Similarly, the

bookâs more central argument that Catholic marriages legitimized and protected black families could use further reinforcement. While Marottiâs title conveys the impression that black Catholic marriages would be prominently analyzed, the topic is mainly confined to the final chapter. Only a few specific examples of black marriages are discussed, and within those cases, some marriages were not listed in official parish registries. To be sure, Marotti does present some convincing evidence when he notes that free-born Abraham Lancaster and Jane Canova received a civil marriage license from St. Johns Country. Additionally, he argues that Afro-Floridians expressed a sense of empowerment through their association with the church. However, more examples are needed that demonstrate the direct link between Catholic marriages and the preservation of slave families.

In regard to the textâs other central points, methodological concerns are also present in the analysis of the Patriot War testimonies. The claims, which are the foundation of the bookâs first five chapters, are extremely informative but must be read critically. As Marotti acknowledges, many of the aggrieved petitioners and witnesses were financially motivated to present Spanish Florida in the best light possible. While U.S. forces viewed Florida as an undeveloped colony, property holders had to impart the opposite impression in order to convince authorities that their claims were just. In all likelihood, a number of witnesses gave generous estimates of their holdings. However, these concerns should not distract from the analytical value of these sources. For instance, Marotti offers an unassailable insight when he notes that Afro-Floridians achieved a major coup when white petitioners candidly spoke of their achievements.

The concerns mentioned above should not distract from the bookâs considerable contributions to the field. Marottiâs research on the Patriot War claims, which began with his dissertation, is a great resource for understanding East Floridian society during the late Second Spanish Florida Period and the Second Seminole War. Although the authorâs main focus is the black population, his work is among the few that illuminate the lives of the colonyâs Euro-American inhabitants. Although there is much focus on Spanish Florida as a slave haven, more work is needed on understanding Spanish efforts to recruit white planters and how this can be reconciled with the previous sanctuary policy. In addition, Marotti demonstrates his grasp of the fieldâs historiography, which allows him to contextualize and better analyze his primary sources. He is keenly aware of recent trends to situate Florida within the Atlantic world, as the chapter discussing slave efforts to escape to the Bahamas illustrates. Ultimately, however, Marottiâs main intellectual thrust is the extension of the Florida sanctuary narrative into an era when it was often assumed it no longer held any explanatory power.

Notes

[1]. Jane Landers, ed., *Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 6.

[2]. James G. Cusick, *The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 36.