



Elizabeth Gritter. *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954.* Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. Illustrations. 380 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-4475-7; \$40.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8131-4474-0.

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Recovering Black Electoral Politics: Memphis before the Civil Rights Era

An old-style southern machine politician who, according to A. Philip Randolph, "out-Hitlered Hitler," and a black Republican with a penchant for taking on his intraparty rivals "in such turmoil that mob action was openly suggested" such are the main characters of Elizabeth Gritter's first book *River of Hope* (pp. 158, 77). And these colorful tour guides, through the ebbs and flows, aspirations and disappointments of black Memphis before the civil rights era, do not fail to entertain readers. Navigating between a ground-level analysis of Beale Street political maneuvering and the advances of African American activists and politicians on the national scene, Gritter weaves together a story that establishes the national significance of the black southern vote as a category of historical analysis. Consequently, she traces black Memphians' politics between old allegiances to the Republican Party in the South and an emerging "New Negro" faction much more likely to support the nascent cause of civil rights in the Democratic Party.

Robert R. Church Jr. is one of the two major guides to this story. The son of an upstart African American businessman and the founder of the Lincoln League, Church's position on the fringes of a state Republican Party reflects both the limits and the possibilities of black politics in Memphis at the time. On the one hand, Church's "black and tan" faction engaged in a constant, intraparty uphill battle against southern "lily whites,"

which—depending on the respective local prominence of Republicans—gave them more or less influence on party meetings and, eventually, electoral outcomes. On the other hand, Church and his allies viewed this limited space as their only chance to provide an alternative to the coercion of the African American vote by machine politicians like Edward H. Crump, the other guide in this story.

A lifelong Memphian, workaholic, vegetarian, and teetotaler, Crump ran Memphis politics from behind the scenes until his death in 1954. Ruthless and unafraid to intimidate his critics, including Church, in their business and at their kids' baseball games, Crump succeeded in driving many of them literally out of the city. But eventually, he and his tribe had to succumb to changes on the national scene and within the Democratic Party. Crump was increasingly pushed to the background by a new wave of Democratic African American activists who had become disillusioned by what they viewed as the lack of aggressive politics by Church and other African American Republicans. Crump's death is also the capstone of Gritter's narrative. The machine politician's funeral—the largest in Memphis history, as the author notes—is also the burial of a type of local politics marked by efficiency and corruption, racism and benevolence.

Though Gritter clarifies early on that this is not a biography, her fascination with the life journey of Church

in particular is palpable throughout the book. At many points, this thread enables Gritter to attain a depth of storytelling unmatched by works that are focused on the bigger picture. At other times, however, her biographical lens can distract from the many other major actors, some of them arguably longer lasting and more politically effective on the Memphis scene.

This is a work focused on government, elections, and political organizing in the narrower sense of these terms. Gritter does not claim to have written a comprehensive political or community history. She clarifies early on that she does not intend to analyze the broader scope of what is political, although churches, schools, and community organizing are not altogether absent from the book. Her story is intended as a corrective to current understandings of political history, yet without narrowly refocusing the reader's gaze on election days alone. Plenty of street-level perspective remains, thanks in no small part to Gritter's hard work in gathering oral sources. The memories of Roberta Church, Church Jr.'s daughter, in particular, add texture to the narrative. And though the author does not thoroughly explore any possible alternatives to electoral political action for black Memphians before 1954, her goal is clear: she wants her readers to refocus on how African Americans in the South voted, and to acknowledge this kind of analysis as a valid complement, even counterpoint, to the cultural histories that have come to dominate how we understand the period preceding the civil rights era.

Below this level of analysis bubbles the continuing question raised in Charles M. Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi*

Freedom Struggle (1995) and other works: what kind of attention do local political spaces merit in light of the national conversation on race and rights emerging in the twentieth century? Gritter resolves some of the tension by pointing out that while Memphis serves as a case study ... for the Jim Crow South, it also bore peculiar features that distinguished it from the South (p. 2). The obvious connection between these two poles is black migration and a growing rural versus urban divide among African Americans, which included black exposure to the city as a space in which more recent immigrant groups vying for whiteness sought to define themselves against African Americans. Gritter spends precious little time on these aspects, even though both of her main protagonists could trace their family traditions back to the rural South. But then, again, this is a book that remains sharply focused on direct efforts to influence government in one particular setting, with little comparative perspective (p. 2).

In the end, the question of how significant pre-Civil War black electoral efforts really were remains. One wishes that Gritter would have provided her readers with a sharper positioning of her narrative against dominant cultural historiographies of pre-civil rights African American history. *River of Hope* at its best is, after all, an effort to undermine the teleological bents in such approaches, and to redress our understandings of black politics in all its limits as well as promises, before cultural turns changed America and its historiographies forever. From this guided tour between spaghetti dinners cooked up by political machines and Beale Street's black Republican saloons, readers will emerge with a sense that Gritter's is a welcome effort indeed.

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