Robert Whitney & Graciela Chailloux Laffita


During the first three decades of the twentieth century, as many as 300,000 British Caribbean and Haitian workers migrated to Cuba. Although a number of scholars have recently begun to examine the history of Afro-Caribbean immigration to Cuba, *Subjects or Citizens* is only the second book to be published on the subject (and the first written in English). One of the authors’ main goals is to question the idea of Cuban exceptionalism by underscoring the island’s historical connections with the rest of the Caribbean. They argue that Cuba has been a nation of immigrants, with roughly half of the island’s population of four million in 1930, for instance, made up of people who arrived after independence from Spain in 1898. Their main conclusion is that British Caribbean immigrants generally considered themselves both Cuban and Caribbean.

In the first of five chapters, the authors provide a brief overview of Cuban immigration history and outline their main arguments in relation to Cuban historiography. Evoking the title of an earlier book on which they collaborated (Chailloux Laffita 2005), they pose the question “who are the Cuban people?” while stressing that national identities are constructed over time and that Cuban identity is essentially a diasporic identity. The next three chapters explore the broader economic and political contexts in which British Caribbean migration to Cuba took place. Chapter 2 focuses on British colonial labor policy in the late 1930s and the 1940s in particular, while also considering the work conditions faced by British Caribbean migrants in Cuba and the Dominican Republic and the attitudes of imperial authorities toward them. Chapter 3 looks at the way British Caribbean migrants claimed rights and demanded protection as British subjects by seeking assistance from colonial officials with issues such as compensation for work injuries, legal troubles, discrimination, and—especially as conditions worsened in the 1930s—repatriation to their home islands. Chapter 4, “The Making of a Cuban Working Class,” rather than considering processes of class formation or relations between native and foreign-born workers, provides a top-down view of the way the Cuban government under Fulgencio Batista took advantage of a reduced demand for labor and an expanding state bureaucracy to enact nationalist labor legislation and establish exclusionary labor exchanges in the 1930s. The final chapter examines efforts by British Caribbean immigrants and their descendants to adapt to life in Cuba during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly through their involvement in lodges and churches.
The book relies predominantly on research conducted at the British National Archives and, to a lesser extent, the Jamaican Archives as well as interviews with British Caribbean immigrants and their descendants living in Cuba. The detail provided by the oral histories is original and interesting, although we might ask how typical their experiences were, especially since the authors were able to interview only twenty-seven people (and not all interviews were incorporated into the book due to the time and cost of transcribing them). The government records also provide access to the migrants’ own perspectives in the form of letters sent to British officials, even if the results of such petitions are seldom revealed in the historical record. More extensive research into other sources—including newspapers, sugar company records, and Cuban archival sources—might provide an even more complex picture of the British Caribbean experience in Cuba. While the authors highlight British Caribbean participation in churches and lodges, they pay less attention to other important aspects of the migrant experience, including relations with the Cuban labor movement and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Minimal coverage of the UNIA (erroneously referred to as the United Negro Improvement Association) is particularly notable, considering that more chapters of the organization were founded in Cuba than anywhere else outside of the United States, and nearly all of them by British Caribbean migrants.

In addition to advancing our understanding of the British Caribbean experience in Cuba, this book addresses a number of themes that are central to Cuban and Caribbean history, including plantation agriculture, state formation, national and racial identity, and colonial ideology and policy. It also contributes to a growing body of literature on Cuban regional history since most migrants lived and worked in the eastern part of the island. The main argument that British Caribbean migrants considered themselves both Cuban and Caribbean is compelling, but might be developed further. This claim seems to be based on the interviews conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century with surviving migrants and their descendants, but what about the vast majority of migrants who returned to their home islands before 1960? The popularity of the UNIA, with its emphasis on pan-African unity, also suggests that migrant identity could be more complex than just Cuban and Caribbean.

The authors effectively employ comparative analysis between migrants from different British Caribbean colonies, between British Caribbean, Haitian, and Spanish migrants in Cuba, and between British Caribbean migrants to Cuba and to the Dominican Republic. They see government restrictions on sugar production in 1927 and the worldwide economic depression soon thereafter as major turning points in the lives of British Caribbean migrants in Cuba. By
focusing on the 1930s–1950s, they cover a time period that has received little previous scholarly attention.

*Subjects or Citizens* is a useful addition to the literature on the history of migration in the Caribbean. Were the price less prohibitive, the book would be appropriate for courses on Cuban or Caribbean history. The authors have done an admirable job of extending our knowledge about the history of British Caribbean migration to Cuba and the island’s ties to the rest of the Caribbean. By considering the impact and experiences of migrants returning from Cuba to their home islands, future studies might explore these connections further.

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