

WHITNEY, ROBERT and GRACIELA CHAILLOUX LAFFITA. *Subjects or Citizens. British Caribbean Workers in Cuba, 1900–1960*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville [etc.] 2013. x, 237 pp. \$74.95. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000248

Fifteen years ago, Louis Pérez published the celebrated *On Becoming Cuban*, illustrating how Cuba's encounter with the United States shaped Cuban identity.¹ Robert Whitney and Graciela Chailloux Laffita offer another international dynamic shaping what it meant to be Cuban before the Revolution of 1959: the interactions between Cubans and British Caribbean workers in eastern Cuba and the larger relationship between eastern Cuba and the rest of the Caribbean. While Pérez looked especially at the cultural dynamic shaping the imagination of what is Cuban identity, the authors of *Subjects or Citizens* focus on transnational migrant working-class experiences on the job, on relations with the Cuban and British governments, and on their own cultural lives as they carved out identities for themselves in eastern Cuba and in turn shaped the identity of this most Caribbean part of the Caribbean island of Cuba. As a result, the authors (one based in Canada, the other in Cuba) argue “that Cuban national identity in the twentieth century, like that of other Caribbean peoples, is a diaspora identity” (p. 20), but more than just a result of the African and Spanish diaspora. Rather, one has to also consider the Caribbean diaspora to the island.

Whitney and Chailloux Laffita unravel this identity by exploring records in nearly twenty different archives, museums, and institutes in Canada, the United Kingdom, Jamaica, and Cuba. While most of the utilized written primary source material comes from the Jamaican Archives and the British National Archives, the authors incorporate small golden nuggets of insight from municipal records scattered throughout eastern Cuba. They couple the written sources with formal interviews with twenty-seven people of British Caribbean origin still living in Cuba at the beginning of the millennium. These oral histories – along with countless informal conversations with Cubans of British Caribbean descent – have also yielded more papers and records stored in peoples' personal collections. The result is a history of the British Caribbean experience in eastern Cuba as told from British, North American, and Cuban official sources as well as the very people who make up this story.

And what a fascinating story it is. There is a long historiography of Cuba that identifies the “exceptional” nature of the island. This exceptionalism is based in part on the island's longer history with slavery than most other Caribbean islands, its unique relationship with the United States, and of course the revolution of 1959 that created the first socialist state in the western hemisphere. However, the authors ask the reader to reconsider this exceptionalism. Cuba is a Caribbean island that went through most of the same torturous historical episodes of history that its sister islands did. Now this is not a particularly earth-shattering claim. After all, Gordon Lewis made the same claim about the Caribbean islands over thirty years ago by noting how the histories of the islands were more different in degree than in kind.² But so many scholars of Cuba, both on and off the island, have tended to see Cuba in exceptionalist terms. Yet, when one explores the eastern region of the island – the primary location for this book – one discovers that the Oriente is much more “Caribbean-like” than western Cuba. The primary reason is the influx of hundreds of thousands of British West Indian and Haitian workers to labor in the sugar-cane fields

1. Louis A. Pérez, Jr, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).

2. Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492–1900* (Baltimore, MD, 1983).

of the east beginning in the early 1900s. Eastern Cuba was intimately linked to the trans-Caribbean networks of migrant labor flows, whether those workers were coming to Cuba directly from their home islands in the 1910s, from Panama after the opening of the Canal in 1914, or from other parts of Central America in the 1920s when banana and fruit production dynamics changed there. In short, Cuba – or at least the eastern part – was not exceptional but part of the larger experience of working-class Caribbean history.

The issue of identity, though, was largely unimportant until the 1930s. The strength of the book comes through in the middle chapters when the authors reveal how shifting political struggles emanating from Cuba's 1933 Revolution and the Great Depression caused both the Cuban government and British Caribbean workers themselves to consider just who these workers were in this foreign land. And here the authors succeed in showcasing how Cuba was anything but exceptional in the Caribbean in the 1930s by placing the island within the larger dimensions of revolution, labor riots, and racist labor politics throughout the region. For instance, as the depression hit Jamaica, unemployment spiked but the traditional release valve of migration declined because nobody wanted new foreign workers coming to their shores. From 1935 to 1939, labor strikes and riots surged through the British West Indies, causing alarm among government officials in the islands and in Britain. At exactly the same time in the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo unleashed a massacre of some 30,000 Haitian workers in an effort to "whiten" the country. In Cuba, British Caribbean workers found themselves targeted by new nationalist legislation emerging from the 1933 Revolution in which Cuban politicians sought and gained working-class support for their anti-immigrant initiatives.

British Caribbean workers in Cuba, though, endeavored to escape their new dilemma of not being wanted back home due to high unemployment and not being wanted in Cuba due to the "Cuba for Cubans" legislation emerging out of Havana: they appealed to the British government for help. This appeal to British citizenship was a labor strategy that presented the government with a dilemma. On the one hand, with Hitler on the move in Europe, both London and Kingston needed to secure the loyalty of British Caribbean workers who were at that moment rioting throughout the islands. As the authors put it, workers were "calling the ideological bluff of the empire" (p. 84) by forcing it to come to the aid of its historically repressed subjects through repatriation or financial relief. Yet, by claiming to be British subjects, these Caribbean workers in Cuba set themselves apart, and thus set themselves up to be targets of growing Cuban nationalist resentment. This resentment was supported by much of Cuba's working class. Why would Cuban workers support targeting Caribbean workers? It was more than just Jamaicans taking Cuban jobs, the authors note. The post-1933 Cuban state was populist in nature and thus appealed to workers for support. The workers had long opposed foreign capitalist corporations who often brought Caribbean workers into Cuba via private ports. Cuban leaders were able to frame the legislation to control, deport, and restrict Caribbean workers by referring to these measures as a means to reign in previously unrestricted foreign (i.e. US) capitalism and thus to benefit Cuban workers.

But not all British Caribbean workers left Cuba. The final chapter of the book beautifully incorporates oral histories to illustrate how those who remained in Cuba became "Cubans" while retaining their Caribbean identities – language, traditions, sports, and religions. These workers were Caribbean Cubans who helped to solidify Cuba's Caribbean diaspora identity.

Subjects or Citizens will appeal to a wide audience both for its subject matter and its conceptual framework. This is a must-read for students of Latin American, Caribbean, and Cuban labor history. While Cuban labor studies have long mentioned the role of Caribbean workers on the island, no book until now has illustrated in such complex detail this history nor how it stretched beyond the 1920s until the Cuban Revolution. Scholars interested in transnational history will appreciate how the authors weave together Cuban

and Caribbean historical events, actions by Cuban, regional, and imperialist governments, as well as flows of working people and communications to and from Cuba. Finally, Caribbean historians interested in linkages and transnational regional developments in the first half of the twentieth century have a useful framework in which to re-imagine the human movements of working people across the Caribbean. Cuba was definitely a main site of regional economic development and thus the central pole attracting migrant labor, but this book insists – and insists successfully – that Cuba cannot be studied in isolation and must be understood within a regional Caribbean context in which migrant workers found employment on the island and in which the same working people from various islands helped to shape Cuba’s diaspora identity.

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WEISS, HOLGER. *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.* [Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 14.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2014. xvi, 752 pp. € 199.00; \$258.00. doi:10.1017/S002085901400025X

The relationship between “class” and “race” in the 1920s and 1930s, captured in the term “the Negro Question”, has always been an “uneasy marriage”. Through the agency of African-American, African-Caribbean, and African intellectuals it was placed on the political agenda of several national and international organizations and movements, notably the global communist networks and, at the other end of the spectrum, Marcus Garvey’s UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association). Whereas Garvey put race before class and advocated a Pan-African policy, communists from an African background contributed to and followed, sometimes reluctantly, Comintern policies.

In *Framing a Radical African Atlantic* Holger Weiss follows black participants in the communist networks in great detail, focusing on the ITUC-NW (International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers) and on its most important members and leaders: (Kweku) Bankole Awoonor Renner (Ghana, 1898–1970), James W. Ford (Alabama, USA, 1893–1957), George Padmore (Trinidad, 1902–1959;¹ his real name was Malcolm Nurse), and Otto Huiswoud (Suriname, 1893–1961). The ITUC-NW, founded in 1928, was the “Comintern’s answer to the ‘Negro Question’”, a question, as Weiss stresses, which had become a transnational one at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 7). It formed on the one hand part of the Comintern and RILU (Red International of Labour Unions) networks and on the other part of the networks of people of African descent who, bound by “black solidarity”, engaged in finding solutions for the racial inequalities worldwide, starting in the USA, as well as advocating an anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic struggle. One of the proposed solutions has become known as the “Black Belt thesis”, referring to

1. There is confusion about his year of birth; some scholars say 1903, Weiss claims it was 1900 (p. 38). It seems almost certain that he was born on 28 July 1902.