

Introduction

By the time he was thirty-five, Aurelio Castillo bore the telltale signs of a life spent cutting sugar cane on the plantations of eastern Cuba. His face, hands, and body were covered in scars from the machete wounds that were all too common in a world of dangerous work and periodic fighting. On his right arm was the distinct pockmark of a vaccination, a physical reminder that Castillo, a native of Haiti, had been recruited by a sugar company representative and injected by a company doctor in accordance with Cuban and Haitian law. Vaccination and work injury scars were not the only indelible marks on Castillo's body. There were others of his own making. On his right forearm was a tattoo of Cuba's patron saint with the year 1922 and a caption, in Spanish, that read "Remember the Virgin of Charity." His left arm depicted a "bouquet of flowers, a nude woman and the initials A.C.Z."¹ The vaccination and machete scars evoke a world of harsh work conditions and strict state regulations. The tattoos tell of social relationships, religious beliefs, and personal meanings that managed to flourish amid this difficult and monotonous world.

This book is about the hundreds of thousands of Haitians like Castillo who migrated between Haiti and Cuba during the first four decades of the twentieth century. The marks on Castillo's body provide a parallel to one of the book's overarching arguments. Although sugar companies and state institutions exerted immense control over the movements and labor of their workforce, they never had the kind of absolute power they claimed.

¹ Prison record for Aurelio Castillo, March 9, 1936, National Archives of Cuba: Presidios y Carceles (hereafter ANCP) legajo 319, expediente 22.

In exploring the areas where institutional power broke down, I show the ways that ordinary individuals influenced larger processes of state-building, plantation agriculture, and race-making in the early twentieth-century Caribbean. Throughout eastern Cuba, Haitians and individuals of other nationalities created networks of petty commerce, worship, and community embedded within sugar plantations, though ultimately extending beyond them – sometimes back to Haiti. For Haitians and other workers, these worlds of labor, leisure, and spirituality were not easily separable, a fact that Aurelio Castillo literally embodies. Furthermore, Haitians' efforts to achieve a semblance of autonomy, often by collaborating with Cubans and individuals of other nationalities, shaped state policies, economic realities, religious beliefs, and ideas of race in both Haiti and Cuba at a foundational moment in their respective histories.

Haitians migrated as the first foreign-led development projects were instituted in Cuba and Haiti. In the early twentieth century, these were implemented under the auspices of the US imperial state. Between 1898 and the 1930s, the United States sought to remake the economy, government, and society of Haiti and Cuba – always in the name of progress but often through military violence and policies that enriched US corporations at the expense of local populations. As the labor force that sustained the export economies of both Haiti and Cuba, this mobile contingent of rural-born Haitians was crucial to these projects. As a result, their actions had impacts out of proportion with their material poverty and political disfranchisement. But they did more than just formal wage labor. In fact, analyzing migrants' sugar work alongside their efforts to sustain informal economies, subsistence activities, religious communities, and leisure reveals the local and transnational dynamics of imperialism, state-building, and economic expansion in Haiti and Cuba. Seasonal migrants demonstrate the impossibility of understanding the history of Haiti, Cuba, or US foreign relations in isolation from each other.

Seasonal migrants like Castillo were representative of a new category of immigrant laborer that was emerging throughout the globe: the guestworker. Although that word did not yet exist in the 1910s, national and imperial governments throughout the planet experimented with state-brokered, temporary contract migration to solve the labor needs of industries and appease anti-immigrant voices.² Many of the Haitians who

² Hahamovitch, "Creating Perfect Immigrants," 72; Surak, "Guestworkers: A Taxonomy," 89.

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migrated to Cuba signed contracts that required them to work for a fixed period of time before returning home, placing them within the first global generation of guestworkers. Haitian migrants shaped the conception and creation of temporary contract legislation in both Haiti and Cuba through their actions and petitions. The migration policies that emerged carried rigid prescriptions for who could migrate, how, and for how long. However, their full application was always subverted by migrants' actions, illustrating the "small-scale dynamics of large-scale processes."³

If Aurelio Castillo's physical marks illustrate the book's major themes, the way those marks are knowable to people today highlights one of the main challenges of uncovering Haitian immigrants' stories. Castillo's details are available to historians only because he was arrested for a crime. A prison official inscribed his physical attributes in his penal record for the purpose of identifying him. The jailer had no interest in the tattoos' meanings or the scars' provenance; that knowledge will remain unknown. Yet such official documents, written for different purposes than our own, are the principal sources available to historians. The vast majority of the Haitians who traveled to Cuba in the early twentieth century were illiterate. They left very few letters, memoirs, or other written records of the sort that normally form the basis of migration histories. In response, this book uses judicial records, censuses, newspapers, company and consular correspondence, military intelligence, travel literature, and novels in order to reconstruct the worlds that Haitian migrants helped create before they left Haiti, during their sojourns in Cuba, and upon their return. The result is a story, not only of a significant but understudied group of Caribbean migrants but also the way that the consolidation of centralized states, national identities, and export economies were shaped transnationally and from below.

THE USES OF HAITIAN MIGRANTS

During the first four decades of the twentieth century, approximately 200,000 Haitians migrated seasonally and permanently to eastern Cuba. They traveled on small sloops and large steamships. Some disembarked in major ports like Santiago and Guantánamo with Haitian passports and labor contracts in hand, where they were greeted by medical examiners and customs officials. Others arrived at remote areas of the Cuban coast without identification or pre-arranged work. Those with contracts were

³ Rebecca J. Scott, "Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes."

recruited to work on Cuban sugar plantations for a single year and expected to return to Haiti thereafter. An untold number remained in Cuba for multiple years or even permanently, often in disregard of the stipulations of their contracts. Though most Haitians were contracted to work on Cuban sugar plantations, many eventually moved to the island's much smaller coffee industry. Indeed, Haitians provided the labor that fueled increases in both crops. In early twentieth-century Cuba, sugar rose to new heights of productivity and profitability. Coffee production reached its highest levels in almost a century. Despite many Cubans' opposition to Haitian immigration, most recognized these workers as "the best arms" for producing both commodities.⁴

Migration had noticeable effects on Haiti as well. For a country with a population between two and a half and three million, a few hundred thousand people was significant. In national terms, somewhere between 6 and 8 percent of Haiti's population traveled to Cuba in the period. Considering that most were young men hailing from a few specific regions, the effect on local areas was striking. "Never before has there been anything like the present exodus," mused one state official in the migrant-sending area of Aux Cayes.⁵

As the official's statement indicates, Haitian migration to Cuba represents one of the first major migratory movements out of Haiti – a country now synonymous with refugees, emigration, and boat people. Haitian laborers' movements to Cuba and the Dominican Republic in the first decades of the twentieth century were the first large-scale out-migrations since planters and slaves fled Saint Domingue during the events of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). But Haitians were not the only foreigners arriving in Cuba. They were the second-largest national group, behind Spaniards, in a wave of immigrants that reached over a million people – among them individuals from other parts of the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and the United States.⁶

The fact that Haitian laborers moved between Haiti and Cuba – where they distributed money, goods, and ideas – illustrates that these two countries

⁴ "La inmensa riqueza cafetalera de Yateras," *Diario de Cuba*, August 4, 1928.

⁵ Memorandum from Division Commander, Southern Division to Department Commander, Department of the South, "Report on Labor Conditions in the Southern Division," February 12, 1920, United States National Archives, Record Group (hereafter USNA RG) 127, Entry 176 Box 1, Folder: [Monthly Reports] January 1919–September 1921.

⁶ Cervantes-Rodríguez, *International Migration in Cuba*; Vega-Suñol, *Norteamericanos en Cuba*; Whitney and Chailloux Laffita, *Subjects or Citizens*; López, *Chinese Cubans*; Giovannetti, "The Elusive Organization of 'Identity.'"

were closely bound beyond their common position under US imperial control. In many parts of Haiti, crossing the water to Cuba was logistically easier than heading only a few miles farther inland. These people experienced, and ultimately shaped, the social, cultural, political, and economic landscapes of both Haiti and Cuba at the very moment that local leaders and imperial officials exerted immense energy to transform them. Though migrants were incorporated into these top-down visions, it has not previously been clear exactly how their actions shaped these processes. Part of the problem is that migrants' experiences in either country are largely unknown.⁷

Migrants themselves left almost no written documents. Certain aspects of their lives, however, were written *about* extensively. Individuals within Haiti, Cuba, and the United States reduced migrants to their perceived economic value, governability, and putative racial traits. James Scott's characterization of the documents produced by modern state institutions is especially apt. "They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer."⁸

There was little consensus in either Haiti or Cuba about the economic advantages or disadvantages of migration. The issue divided US officials as well. Perhaps the most obvious supporters were those tied to the Cuban sugar industry that had lobbied for permission to contract Caribbean workers in the first place. Haitians' importance to the sugar industry, which constituted the lifeblood of Cuba's economy, became clear during a brief immigration ban that occurred in 1928. As planters attested: "Sustaining Haitian immigration is necessary on all levels and more than necessary, urgent, not only for the proper development of the sugar industry, but for the economic stability of the nation itself."⁹ Individuals in Haiti proclaimed the economic benefits as well. Some praised the revenue that migration brought to the perennially underfunded state in the form of passport and other fees.¹⁰ Others believed that the high wages earned in Cuba brought much-needed cash into rural Haiti.¹¹

⁷ On the major gaps in our knowledge of Haitians' experiences, see Sklodowska, *Espectros y espejismos*, 11, 104–5.

⁸ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 3.

⁹ Letter from the Asociacion Nacional de Colonos to the Governors and Mayors of the Provinces of Oriente and Camagüey. July 5, 1928. Archivo Provincial de Santiago de Cuba: Gobierno Provincial (hereafter APSGP), Legajo 2416 Exp 4 p. 24.

¹⁰ Millspaugh, *Haiti under American Control*, 143.

¹¹ "MID Reports: Estimate of the Economic Situation," June 14, 1921, USNA RG 127 E38 Box 13, Folder H-127 General Correspondence.

Not all were convinced that Haitians' journeys to Cuba would benefit either country economically. Accusations that migrants drove down wages in Cuba were common. Journalists and state officials referred to Haitians and other immigrant laborers as "cheap arms" because they apparently "content themselves with ridiculous wages."¹² For some within Haiti, the large-scale exit of productive laborers would be the country's ruin. "If the immigration to Cuba continues at its present rate," one US official warned in 1920, "there will be a famine."¹³

Writings about Haitian migrants were also obsessed with questions of governability. For state officials and company administrators, the existence of a mobile, heterogeneous workforce raised concerns about regulating migrants' movements across national borders and managing their labor. The movement of people between Haiti and Cuba occurred as both countries exerted more control over who and what could enter and leave their territories and how. In 1902, the Cuban government banned the entrance of all contract laborers into the country, seeking to end a period of relatively free flows of goods and people between Haiti and Cuba. Over the course of the next decade, Cuban officials bemoaned the continued entrance of people, now considered illegal, into Cuba.

Their complaints continued until 1913, when the Cuban president first authorized sugar companies to import contract laborers for their annual harvests. That which had been illegal but largely unenforceable had become an object of regulation. Over the next decades, Haitian and Cuban state policies variously required migrants to obtain passports, register with consular officials, undergo medical examinations, and spend time in Cuban quarantine stations – all for a fee. With the exception of two brief migration bans in 1918 and 1928, Haitians circulated between the two countries under the auspices of company and state until 1931. That year, the Cuban government permitted the final contingent of migrants to enter Cuba. Over the course of the next decade, some 38,500 Haitians were forcefully deported from Cuban soil, provoking new debates in Haiti about how returning migrants should integrate into

¹² "Importación de braceros," *La Prensa*, January 12, 1913 quoted in Carlos de Velasco, "El problema negro," *Cuba Contemporánea*, February 1913, 75.

¹³ Memorandum from Division Commander, Southern Division to Department Commander, Department of the South, "Report on Labor Conditions in the Southern Division," February 12, 1920, USNA RG 127 E176 Box 1, Folder: [Monthly Reports] January 1919–September 1921.

society. The Cuban government resumed its previous role of restricting migration.¹⁴

While state officials sought to regulate migrants' cross-border movements, sugar company administrators were concerned with controlling their labor. This meant limiting workers' mobility laterally between plantations and vertically within company labor hierarchies. To this end, companies regularly posted armed guards to prevent workers from leaving one sugar plantation for the potentially higher wages or better conditions of another.¹⁵ Administrators also sought to limit workers' mobility between sectors of the plantation through race management. Haitians were part of a diverse labor force that included individuals from Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, Europe, and China. Most notable were the Jamaicans and other British Caribbean people, who were concentrated in the sugar zones with Haitians. As in other parts of the Americas, Cuban sugar planters sought to divide their workforces along racial lines to promote productivity and prevent labor organizing.¹⁶ Within this world of divided workers, the moniker "Haitian" held such strong associations with sugar cane cutter that it was often applied to any group of black fieldworkers regardless of their actual national origins.

Journalists and state officials interpreted migration through the reductive lens of race. Proponents of migration in Haiti believed that migrants' "sojourn in Cuba does them a world of good beyond the money they receive."¹⁷ Such statements thinly veil a racial assumption that was common throughout the Americas and the wider world: wage labor and property accumulation would "improve," "modernize," or "civilize" rural populations that had previously engaged in subsistence activities because it would force them to change their habits.¹⁸ A Haitian consul

¹⁴ As before, this did not stop Haitians from arriving on Cuban soil. For example, in 1940, a group of Haitians and one Martinican left Port-au-Prince for eastern Cuba where they were eventually arrested by Cuban authorities. See Dr. Alejandro Rodríguez Cremé, Medico de Puerto to Juez de Instrucción, Baracoa, May 27, 1940, Archivo Provincial de Santiago de Cuba: Audiencia Territorial de Oriente (hereafter APSATO) 23/251/1.

¹⁵ Carr, "Omnipotent and Omnipresent?" 260–91; McLeod, "Undesirable Aliens: Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers," 99.

¹⁶ Esch and Roediger, "One Symptom of Originality"; Giovannetti, "Grounds of Race"; Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work*; López, *Chinese Cubans*, 32; Poblete, *Islanders in the Empire*, 17, 94.

¹⁷ Memorandum from Department Commander, Department of Cayes to Chief of Gendarmerie, "Monthly Report of Conditions – Department of Cayes." August 2, 1920, USNA RG 127 E176 Box 1, Folder: [Monthly Reports] January 1919–September 1921.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Braceros*, 4, 6; Drinot, *The Allure of Labor*, 3; Esch and Roediger, "One Symptom of Originality," 12; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 99.

was less subtle: “Our country dwellers, barefoot from their birth, illiterate, accustomed to sleeping on the ground, eating on the ground or squatting, upon arriving in Cuba are continually shod, they sleep at least in a hammock, eat at a table, and learn, if not to read, at least to sign their names, often in Spanish and they go to the theatre.”¹⁹ It is no wonder that some Haitian state officials in the 1930s anticipated migrants’ return with excitement – what better group to carry out their ambitious attempts to modernize Haitian export agriculture?

If some Haitians hoped that migrants’ experiences abroad would turn Haiti into a thriving agricultural country along the lines of Cuba, many Cubans expressed racial fears that migration would turn Cuba into “another Haiti.” For many, the neighboring country represented a cautionary tale about the poverty and instability brought on by black self-government. In fact, understandings of blackness in Cuba had been fundamentally shaped by the neighbor across the Windward Passage since armed people of African descent destroyed slavery and plantation agriculture during the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804).²⁰ Later, during Cuba’s own nineteenth-century independence wars, the multi-racial separatist movement forged the idea of a raceless Cuban nationalism, partially in response to Spanish propaganda warning of a repeat of a Haitian-style race war.²¹ When Haitian and British Caribbean immigrants arrived in growing numbers in the decades after independence, the black foreigners complicated ongoing debates about the meanings of black citizenship in the new republic and challenged claims that Cuba was a nation of racial harmony.²²

At the crux of racial debates was the question of whether immigrants were distinct from black Cubans because of national differences or connected by a common African ancestry. In the realm of politics and citizenship, Afro-Cubans could distinguish themselves from Haitians and other Caribbean immigrants to push for their own inclusion within the Cuban nation.²³ Other Cubans, in contrast, lumped black Cubans with

¹⁹ Edmond Craig, Ancien Consul à Cuba, “A propos de la Brochure de M. Léo Laville,” *L’Autre Cloche*, May 19, 1933.

²⁰ Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 134; Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror*; Sklodowska, *Especros y espejismos*; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 131.

²¹ Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 112–13; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 131.

²² De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 45–53; Helg, “Race in Argentina and Cuba,” 56; Chomsky, “Barbados or Canada?” 424–7; Chomsky, “The Aftermath of Repression,” 4; McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens: Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers,” 18–43.

²³ Chomsky, “The Aftermath of Repression,” 2.

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Haitians and British Caribbean peoples, fearing that immigrants would upset demographic balances on the island and swing political power into the hands of blacks. More galling was the notion that primitive immigrants would decrease overall levels of black culture in Cuba through inevitable mixture and reduce black competence in general. In the minds of many Cubans, Haitians were distinct from black Cubans. Nevertheless, Haiti served as a warning of what could easily come to pass in Cuba.²⁴ Haiti was not just a place; it was also a stage of black backwardness into which Cubans could lapse.

In discussions of race and immigration in Cuba, scale mattered. In national-level immigration debates, it was common for officials to refer to Haitian and British Caribbean immigrant populations in the same breath or to use one group's name to refer to all black immigrants. In 1928, Spanish traveler Luis Araquistain feared that Cuba "would soon be a black and yellow land, land of Haitians, Jamaicans, and Chinese, the only ones that will be able to inhabit it." Elsewhere, he quoted a Cuban newspaper describing this same process as "the Haitianization of Oriente."²⁵ At the local level, forms of specific racial knowledge developed among plantation administrators, provincial officials, and journalists, who distinguished between Haitians and British West Indians, especially when it came to issues of labor. Here, the assumption that Haitians were particularly suited to cutting cane was most salient. At the ground level of rural communities, I argue, these divisions blurred as Haitians, Cubans, and British Caribbean people interacted in ways that defied the racial and national prescriptions of journalists, politicians, and company administrators.

In many cases, the entrance of Haitians into Cuba accentuated and inflamed racist discourses that had previously been applied to Cubans of African descent. One of these equated Haitians' and Cubans' African religious practices with savagery and cannibalism. Journalists and social scientists proclaimed the incompatibility of African religious practices with civilized society. They were also concerned that these religious rites required practitioners to sacrifice small children. In early republican Cuba there were a number of highly publicized, sensational cases in which people of African descent – both Cubans and Haitians – were falsely accused of attempting to kidnap and kill children for ritual purposes.

²⁴ Carlos de Velasco, "El problema negro," *Cuba Contemporánea*, February 1913; Chomsky, "Barbados or Canada?" 424–7.

²⁵ Araquistain, *La agonía antillana*, 183, 193.

The Cuban national press provided readers with grotesque tales of African savagery while religious practitioners were subjected to both judicial persecution and popular violence.²⁶

Some journalists believed that Haitians and other immigrants would start a race war. One Havana newspaper recommended that “the country put itself on guard against the grave conflict not so remote in possibility, that comes upon us with the arrival of these ‘Antillean’ workers.”²⁷ Even the peaceable arrival of a boatload of Haitian agricultural workers was referred to by a Cuban journalist as “The Haitian Invasion.”²⁸ Throughout the Atlantic world, associations between Haitians and race war date back to the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), when slaves successfully revolted against their masters and overthrew French colonialism. For twentieth-century Cubans, however, these were not just dormant legacies of a previous century’s conflict but a specter that continued to haunt Cuban politics.²⁹

The most notorious example was the *Partido Independiente de Color* (PIC), a Cuban political party founded by Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonnet. It comprised Afro-Cuban veterans of the Cuban independence wars and was declared illegal because it included individuals of only one race and challenged the idea that Cuba was a raceless nation. In 1912, a demonstration by the PIC sparked massive state-led and popular repression in eastern Cuba. Thousands of Afro-Cubans, including many without affiliation to the party, were murdered in Oriente province. What historians consider an act of cold-blooded violence, Cubans at the time considered a race war perpetrated by blacks. That Cuban journalists linked the race war to Haitians is beyond doubt. *La Prensa*, a Havana newspaper, noted: “From Jamaica and Haiti came no small part of the contingent that followed Estenoz and Ivonnet in the racist rebellion.”³⁰ By the time Haitian migration was legalized in 1913, the Cubans who feared race war drew upon both Haiti’s revolution and Cuba’s *Partido*

²⁶ Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 109–14; Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, 99–104; Román, *Governing Spirits*; Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 194.

²⁷ “Importación de braceros,” *La Prensa*, January 12, 1913, quoted in Carlos de Velasco, “El problema negro,” *Cuba Contemporánea*, February 1913, 75.

²⁸ “La invasión haitiana,” *El Cubano Libre*, August 5, 1915.

²⁹ Chomsky, “The Aftermath of Repression,” 10–13; McLeod, “Undesirable Aliens: Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers,” 46–7.

³⁰ “Importación de braceros,” *La Prensa*, January 12, 1913, quoted in Carlos de Velasco, “El problema negro,” *Cuba Contemporánea*, February 1913, 75.