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Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth
Century (review)

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Cuban Studies, Volume 34, 2003, pp. 219-220 (Review)

Published by University of Pittsburgh Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cub.2004.0019>



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the concept of the African diaspora and its meanings for African Americans throughout the hemisphere. She shares her thoughts on the state of black intellectual development within Cuba and—as in the case of Martínez Furé—comments on the implicit, unconscious racism evident in many forms of national discourse.

More than anything else, *Afro-Cuban Voices* does an excellent job of problematizing the concept of “the Afro-Cuban community” and “the Afro-Cuban perspective,” providing the reader with a surprisingly wide spectrum of distinct views and life experiences. It does the international community a service in this sense by offering relatively direct access to a few of the countless voices in Cuba that have no means of making themselves heard. The writing style is clear and easy to read, and the content highly significant. I found the testimonies to be very compelling. For instance, I was amazed to discover how many middle-aged Cubans had grandparents who were born into slavery and had been told firsthand about that period when they were young. The sense of awareness among Afro-Cubans about the extent of suffering in their recent past and the gains they have achieved over the past century is striking. Equally noteworthy are their views on the ways they have benefited from the revolution and the areas in which it has failed to meet expectations. While the interviews provide more basic information than synthetic analysis, it is information that has been sorely lacking. *Afro-Cuban Voices* is an important work for all those interested in contemporary race relations and one I highly recommend.

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María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno. *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*. With a new introduction by Elizabeth Dore. Edited by Daisy Rubiera Castillo. Translated by Anne McLean. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000. 182 pp.

This testimonial history by María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902–1997), *Reyita*, provides a unique perspective on Cuba’s past, interpreting it through the often-disregarded experiences of a black woman. Like the best testimonial literature, Reyita’s clear, matter-of-fact narrative, translated from the original published in Cuba in 1996, offers a refreshing break from the traditions in Cuban social scholarship that generalize the experiences of all women and all blacks. She represents another of the voices from below, the most alienated segments of Cuban society. Within Cuban studies, *Reyita* can be viewed as a continuation of the classic tales of Esteban Montejo in *Autobiography of a*

Runaway Slave, but one that now speaks from a female viewpoint and recalls critical moments for the nation, from the final abolition of slavery, through the intense racial politics of the 1910s, to the uncertainties of the Batista dictatorship, and to the initial euphoria of the 1959 Revolution. In Latin American Studies more generally, it is comparable to the Brazilian diaries of Carolina María de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* or the earlier chapters of Rigoberta Menchu's *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, which are less concerned with class violence than they are with ethnic traditions and familial struggles for survival.

Reyita recounts her options and the limitations imposed on her, which were distinctively defined by race, gender, and class, but invariably privileges class over the others. Race determined her family's entry point into Cuban society, their liberation from slavery, and their continuing fight against discrimination. It also created a color consciousness that no one escaped. Gender determined her economic possibilities and the nature of her marriage. Yet, ultimately, Reyita accepts that class was the greatest determinant of one's social value in Cuba at midcentury. When speaking of some of her unofficial foster children, she defends her explicit mention of race. "If I point out that some of those children were white, it's to emphasize that the most fundamental problem in Cuba was not just being black, but being poor" (72).

Stylistically, in its first two chapters *Reyita* follows a chronological arrangement that it later rejects in favor of a more random organization. This potentially could leave the reader unsure of the work's direction. The book does not recount Reyita's life to the end; in fact, the period after 1963 remains unclear. By that time, Reyita had chosen to focus on her responsibilities as a grandmother and made few social critiques. She makes no evaluation of the Revolution beyond an appreciation for the new access to education and employment made available to her children and grandchildren. One of the most surprising statements in this book comes not from the main storyteller's own words, but appears early in the scholarly introduction. There, noted feminist historian Elizabeth Dore declares, "*Reyita* is the story of a woman who did *not* [her emphasis] make history because of the conditions she inherited from the past" (1). The assumption is that to "make history" one must create transformations that reach beyond the personal, and that a simple existence is generally not worthy of historical attention. Despite this clear rejection of the subject's historical agency, this work is of pedagogical value to introductory Cuban or Latin American history courses that want to escape the teleological emphasis on the Revolution and teach the value of an ordinary life making history in the most simple ways. Reyita lived the majority of her life "just as a mother," but if her circumstances did not allow her to "make history," at least she was able to interpret it.

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