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## State of Ambiguity

Palmer, Steven

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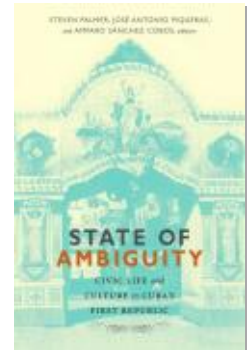
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## CHAPTER II



### **Nation, State, and the Making of the Cuban Working Class, 1920–1940**

Robert Whitney

The majority of persons participating in labor shall be Cubans by birth as much as regards to total amount of wages and salaries as in distinct categories of labor, in the form determined by law. Protection shall also be extended to naturalised Cubans with families born in the national territory, with preference over naturalized citizens who do not meet these conditions, and over aliens. The stipulations in the preceding paragraphs concerning aliens shall not be applied in the filling of indispensable technical positions, subject to the prior formalities of the law, and with provision that apprenticeship in the technical work in question be facilitated for native Cubans.

—**CUBAN CONSTITUTION OF 1940, TITLE VI, SECTION I, ARTICLE 73**

The law shall regulate immigration in keeping with the national economic system and with social necessities. The importation of contract labor, as well as all immigration tending to debase the condition of labor, is prohibited.

—**CUBAN CONSTITUTION OF 1940, TITLE VI, SECTION I, ARTICLE 76**

My parents did not return to Jamaica. My mother maintained contact with an aunt and my father with a brother [in the 1950s]. . . . Once, when I was working at the Base, an American lady told me something offensive. I told her, “Miss, I am Cuban because I was born here, I am Cuban by right.” I am a Jamaican because both my parents are from Jamaica. I am like a ball, you hit it and it jumps from here to there.

—**VIOLDA CAREY, GUANTÁNAMO, OCTOBER 10, 2001**

#### **Who Are the Cuban People?**

The title of this opening section might seem odd given that historians and social scientists agree that most Cubans trace their ancestry to either Spain or Africa. We know that the indigenous inhabitants of Cuba were largely exterminated soon after the Spanish conquest.

Thereafter successive waves of Spanish immigrants and African slaves populated the island. There are many Cubans of Chinese origin, but most of the descendants of the indentured laborers who went to Cuba in the nineteenth century either left the island once their contracts finished or assimilated into Cuban society. And, while immigrants from central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East went to Cuba in the early twentieth century, they did so in much smaller numbers as compared with other Latin American countries. So, in terms of ethnic background, the answer to the question “Who are the Cuban people?” is clear: the large majority of Cubans are of Hispanic or African origin.

Ancestry, however, tells us little about cultural identity. “Culture,” in the broadest sense, refers to sets of popular representations, symbols, traditions, and values that people use to organize social life and help them make sense of their actions and the world around them. Throughout the long colonial period (1511–1898) the formation of Cuban identity was shaped largely by highly localized struggles over the limits and degrees of slavery and freedom. By the middle of the nineteenth century segments of the white upper classes increasingly expressed nationalist (if not always separatist) sentiments against Spanish rule. Cuba had become the world’s largest sugar producer and Spain’s most important colony. Sugar production, in turn, was based on slavery, and by the 1850s blacks (both slave and free) almost outnumbered whites, which provoked racist fears about the “Africanization of Cuba” and a Haitian-like slave revolution. Consequently, despite tensions between the Cuban elite and Spain, economic prosperity and fear of slave revolt kept Cuba under Spanish rule. A white and Hispano-centric vision of a Cuban imagined community was certainly emerging at this time, but membership in that community did not include slaves, free blacks, and mulattos and much of rural Cuba that was outside the control of the Hispano-Cuban economic and intellectual elite.

As for slaves, former slaves, mulattos, and poor rural residents throughout Cuba, their exclusion from a white Hispanic Cuba did not mean they were not Cuban. Their subaltern nationalism, however, was more egalitarian and reflected their struggles for land, freedom, and equality. The day-to-day meaning of freedom for slaves and their descendants was shaped by localized struggles against those who tried to limit freedom based on a person’s race, class, or gender. Local and regional conflicts, in turn, shaped people’s notions of race, class, and nation. And when local struggles merged with islandwide movements (as they increasingly did by the mid-nineteenth century) they brought with them subaltern notions about rights and freedom

that often clashed with those of the usually self-appointed white leaders of these movements. By the last half of the nineteenth century, for most black and mulatto Cubans, freedom from slavery and the struggle for independence were inseparable. Yet if many members of the Cuban elite resigned themselves to safe, if stifling, colonial rule, others could not. The antiracist and egalitarian nationalism of slaves, the freed colored, and their descendants would not accept anything less than the immediate abolition of slavery, political and racial equality, and total independence from Spain.

These tensions within Cuban nationalism became particularly acute between 1868 and 1902. Within a period of thirty years Cuba experienced two wars for independence (1868–78 and 1895–98), the abolition of slavery in 1886, the development of technologically advanced sugar production, and, between 1898 and 1902, the transition from Spanish colony to a semi-independent republic under American hegemony. The cornerstone of American power over Cuba was the Platt Amendment, which the United States imposed on the Cuban Constitution of 1901. According to this amendment, the United States had the right to intervene in Cuban affairs in order to protect private property and ensure political order: it would be semi-independence, or no independence at all. Elite Cuban political opinion supported American intervention because many believed that only American power could ensure Cuban stability. The backbone of Cuba's Liberation Army in both wars had been former slaves and poor peasants. By 1895 the need for political and military unity against Spain forged a viable, if tense, alliance that crossed the lines of race and class. Nationalist discourse, in turn, promised a future republic where all Cubans, regardless of race, would be equal. Yet the inclusiveness of nationalist discourse could not hide the fear of many white Cubans that blacks and mulattos were "culturally" ill-prepared for equal citizenship in an independent Cuba. War, the struggle against slavery and colonialism, and the fight for equal rights had forged a powerful—if divided and frustrated—popular nationalism. Despite these sharp political and cultural tensions, by the time Cuba became a semi-independent republic in 1902, there was a widespread consensus that "Cubans" were people of either Spanish or African origin who had fought for, or at least not actively opposed, independence.

So if we know that most Cubans are of Spanish or African heritage and that a strong, if highly contested, sense of national identity was firmly in place by the end of the nineteenth century, why ask the question "Who are the Cuban people?" at the beginning of a chapter about the formation of the Cuban working class in the twentieth century? I do so not to challenge ac-

cepted wisdom but to suggest that if we are not careful, apparently simple answers to simple questions might cause us to gloss over or ignore complex and historically unique moments of Cuban history. Cuba was the only Caribbean and Latin American nation in the twentieth century to receive large numbers of both white (mostly Spanish) and black (Haitian and West Indian) immigrants. By 1930, *half* of the island's four million inhabitants had arrived after independence. One of the ironies of Cuban history is that more Spaniards migrated to Cuba just before or after Spain lost the island in 1898 than during the entire colonial period. As of 1930, 800,000 Spaniards had entered Cuba.<sup>1</sup> The majority of Spaniards settled in or near the towns and cities of western Cuba. Meanwhile, between 1900 and 1930, 325,000 Afro-Caribbean workers went to Cuba legally, of which roughly 185,000 were Haitians and 140,000 were West Indians.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 80 percent of the West Indians were Jamaican, with the remainder from Barbados and the smaller Leeward and Windward Islands. The vast majority of Caribbeans arrived after 1916, when the Cuban government relaxed immigration regulations to facilitate the labor needs of the rapidly expanding sugar industry in eastern Cuba. The stark reality was that Cuba did not have enough native-born workers to bring in the annual sugar harvests in the east. Consequently, most Haitians and West Indians lived on or near sugar plantations and company towns in the eastern provinces. By the mid-1920s at least one in ten persons in the eastern provinces of Camagüey and Oriente were either Haitian or West Indian.<sup>3</sup> In 1940 there were 40,000 legal British West Indians in Cuba, with perhaps another 55,000 to 60,000 illegal residents.<sup>4</sup>

Yet despite the dramatic change in the size and composition of the Cuban population in the twentieth century, we know very little about how and why immigrants became Cuban. Was it “easier” for Spaniards to become Cuban than it was for Haitians and West Indians, and if so, how and why? Was the experience of Haitians in Cuba different from that of West Indians, and if so, how and why? Most new immigrants could be categorized broadly as “workers” or “peasants” of one kind or another. So once they arrived and settled in Cuba, did they simply become part of a Cuban working class? The answer to this question was by no means obvious because many Spanish and Caribbean immigrants went to Cuba with no guarantee that they would find a job or land or be able to live there permanently. There were simply too many economic, political, and personal uncertainties to make becoming Cuban a foregone conclusion. It was for this reason that Spaniards, West Indians, and Haitians did their best to stay connected with diaspora networks that might, if necessary, provide the means for people to return home

or move elsewhere. In this sense, diaspora identities were inseparable from class identities. If social classes are identified by their relation to the means of production, few people in the Caribbean had secure access to any means of production for any length of time. Wage labor was one way to meet subsistence needs, and it was by no means the most reliable way to do so. Most working people were neither peasants nor proletarians but a complex combination of the two social classes. Frequently, peasantlike means of production coexisted with proletarianlike relations of production.<sup>5</sup> A person could be a wage laborer, cutting cane or working in a sugar mill for part of the year, and a peasant, domestic servant, shoemaker, carpenter, shopkeeper, street vendor, or any combination of occupations for the rest of the year. And when people lost their job, land, or workshop, as many invariably did, knowing they had the option to return home or leave for another country provided some measure of security in an otherwise uncertain world.

This essay cannot possibly provide answers to all the questions raised above. Much more research about the immigrant experience is required before we can make too many accurate generalizations about Cuba's population in the first half of the twentieth century. What I will try to do, however, is show how the Cuban state, under the watchful eye of Fulgencio Batista, implemented labor legislation that "nationalized" the Cuban working class between 1933 and 1940. This period in Cuban history was decisive because, once Batista consolidated power after the revolution of 1933, he and his allies in the police, army, judiciary, and labor movement used the power of the state to compel immigrant workers to either leave the country or become Cuban citizens—or, failing that, to remain in the country illegally and with the constant threat of expulsion. While Spanish and Caribbean immigrants alike were subject to these authoritarian measures, the labor legislation was implemented in such a way so as to make it much harder for Haitians and West Indians to become Cuban than it was for Spaniards. Some people wanted to become Cuban citizens, but were not allowed to because of their race and class; others wanted to leave, but could not because they did not have the money or contacts to do so. Of course many immigrants or migrant workers who had lived in Cuba for years, if not decades, regarded themselves as Cuban, no matter what their legal status or whether or not they ever got their citizen papers.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the case, what is clear is that in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, there was nothing simple about becoming Cuban. Nor was the answer to the question "Who are the Cuban people?" as obvious then (or now) as we might think.

### **The Unmaking of a Cuban Working Class: Eastern Cuba, 1916–1933**

By the 1920s, then, it was by no means clear how “Cuban” the island’s working population was, especially in rural eastern Cuba. Nor was it clear what being “Cuban” meant to new immigrants. For Cuban nationalists whose sense of *cubanidad* (Cubanness) had been shaped by the country’s fight for independence, the “problem” of immigration and the ethnic and racial makeup of the island’s population became one of the defining issues of their time. There was widespread agreement among Cuba’s political and economic elite that Cuba needed *immigrants*, preferably Spaniards; but Cuba also needed *workers*, especially in eastern Cuba. The practical problem was how could governments encourage Spaniards (and white immigrants generally) to become Cubans while discouraging black migrant workers from doing so. In theory, sugar companies were supposed to bring in the workers they needed for each harvest and then ship them back once it was over. In practice, of course, thousands of Haitians and West Indians remained in the country illegally, often with company connivance, and there was little Cuban authorities could do to prevent this. Immigration authorities, in fact, had at best only incomplete information about how many foreign workers were in the country at any given time or where they lived and worked.

The two articles from the Cuban Constitution of 1940 quoted above clearly indicate that that in the 1930s the “Cubanness”—or lack thereof—of the island’s population was of great concern to state leaders. The articles also highlight how issues of national sovereignty, citizenship, immigration, and labor were entangled. The quotation from Violda Carey, however, shows that for some immigrants the meaning of being Cuban had less to do with what the state said it was and more to do with people’s day-to-day lives and personal history. Especially in the Caribbean, where identities *are* diaspora identities, the ability of national or imperial states to supervise and control diaspora populations has been partial at best. Caribbean peoples have always forged their identities within the shifting cracks and spaces of plantation, island, empire, and nation.<sup>7</sup> National identities in the Caribbean are therefore decentered and fragmented.<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere is this observation more accurate than for eastern Cuba, where company-dominated enclave economies had far more control over people’s lives than did the “national” state in Havana. Despite the claims of state leaders, Cuban sovereignty was not only limited by the Platt Amendment, it was also limited by the fact that large parts of the countryside in the east were effectively outside its control. And for workers in the east it was easier, cheaper, and faster to travel to Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados, or Central America

than to Havana, where there was probably little reason to visit at all. Hundreds of thousands of people were in Cuba for one reason and one reason only: to get a job and save enough money to send or take home. Depending on an ever changing set of personal and economic circumstances, the decision to become Cuban (or not) was not the reason many people went to Cuba. On the contrary, given the cyclical and volatile nature of the Cuban and other regional economies, it made more sense for people to keep their options by *not* becoming a citizen in case they had to pick up and leave quickly to find a job elsewhere. Employers, too, and especially sugar companies, wanted access to a cheap and mobile labor force that could easily cross national borders with minimal interference from state bureaucracies. Before the 1930s companies (and Cuban governments) worried that too many immigration regulations would impede the “free” flow of labor, especially during the annual sugar harvests; they also were concerned that too many Cubans on the payroll would result in too many people claiming rights as both citizens and workers. Migrant workers, on the other hand, were easier to hire, fire, or deport and they were less likely (it was hoped) to demand rights and better wages and working conditions than would Cubans.

To one degree or another, this was the reality throughout the Caribbean (and in much of the world). Highly mobile multinational, multiethnic, and multiracial workforces were the norm, and in many ways Cuba was no exception to this general pattern, especially eastern Cuba. But given Cuba’s unique history of anticolonial and nationalist struggle, combined with the international importance of its sugar economy, Cuba’s lack of control over its own laboring population was a particularly sensitive point with nationalists. Of course, in the early twentieth century the idea that governments could or should interfere in how private capitalist recruited and deployed labor smacked of socialism and communism, so most politicians, no matter how nationalist they were, stayed away from such pronouncements. It would take a unique combination of political and economic conditions to create the conditions where Cuban state leaders could assert effective sovereignty over the entire working population of the island. Those conditions would arise, as we will see, between 1933 and 1940.

There were, then, understandable reasons why Cuban nationalists of all tendencies were “obsessed” with the problem of national identity.<sup>9</sup> While the threat of American military intervention had diminished by the 1920s, nationalists worried that the very existence of the “Cuban people” was threatened by the overwhelming power of foreign capital and a sea of foreign labor.<sup>10</sup> The popular saying, “Sin azúcar, no hay país” (Without sugar,



there is no country) certainly rang true to most Cubans, but the conundrum was that without foreign labor, there would be no sugar harvests. Cuba had always depended upon foreign labor, whether it was slave, indentured, or wage labor. And it was not just any foreign labor that would do: the association of black labor with cutting and hauling cane was deeply engrained in the popular imagination, and it was unimaginable to many that sugar could be harvested any other way.<sup>11</sup> This reliance on black foreign labor had provoked two “Africanization of Cuba” scares: the first was in the 1850s when blacks threatened to outnumber whites, and the second was in the early 1920s when the “uncontrolled” importation of Haitians and West Indians threatened to undermine “civilized” Cuban society by increasing crime, disease, and racial tensions.<sup>12</sup> But as long as the logic of capital dictated the need to bring in cheap, foreign, and black labor, the logic of racism would take second place.

For the first thirty years of the twentieth century the racist anxieties of some nationalists were tempered somewhat by the fact that most Haitians and West Indians arrived and remained in the eastern provinces. Politicians based in Havana and the west certainly lamented their inability to assert complete sovereignty over significant portions of eastern Cuba, but in one sense this problem long predated the most recent sugar boom. Western and eastern Cuba had always been different societies. The western half of the island, and Havana in particular, was the historic center of economic and political power. More Spaniards settled in the west, and the east had a higher percentage of black and mulatto Cubans. In the nineteenth century, slave-based agricultural production was not as important in the east, and manumissions were relatively easier for slaves to obtain there. In the east, only about 6 percent of the population lived on sugar estates, whereas in the west the percentage was typically over 50 percent. Most rural people in the east had no title to their land. “Property” lines were usually ill-defined, and customary land tenure persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to 1916 the east was relatively unpopulated. This made it easier for sugar companies, with government support, to purchase, if not simply expropriate, large tracts of land. In the process, peasants became proletarians or fled to more isolated and often mountainous regions where plantation owners or the Cuban state could not touch them. In order to survive, many of the dispossessed attached themselves to regional *caudillos* who might provide them with a job, a plot of land, or some other means to make a living.<sup>14</sup> What complicated matters was that people in the east had a long history of struggle against plantation labor of any kind and the fact that some of the new and largest plantations were American owned and run increased

resentment against both foreign capitalists and the politicians in Havana who supported them. The sugar companies built massive sugar mills, railroads, private port facilities, workers' barracks at the mill itself, and company towns. Many of these mill towns had segregated neighborhoods for company managers, skilled foreign employees, Cuban workers, and, after 1916, foreign workers. As long as most of these foreign workers remained on isolated plantation enclaves in distant Camagüey and Oriente, political elites in Havana might complain, but were not too concerned, about how many foreigners were in the country.

The boom in sugar production, of course, would not last. By the late 1920s international agreements had placed restrictions on the size of Cuba's harvests, with the result that fewer workers were needed for the harvests. Even for those who found work, the harvests lasted three months instead of the usual ten.<sup>15</sup> Once the world depression hit with full force after 1929, the economic and political situation became far worse. In the 1930s, out of a national population of 4 million perhaps 300,000 were chronically unemployed.<sup>16</sup> Even though the massive importations of foreign workers declined after the peak years of 1916–21 and had virtually ended by 1927, the continued presence of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in the country fueled popular resentment against foreign labor. Hunger marches were commonplace. Mass migration of the unemployed and landless from the county to the cities and towns became endemic. Unprecedented numbers of *orientales* (easterners) traveled to western Cuba and Havana in search of work, and many foreigners (especially Jamaicans) joined them. For many westerners, the intrusion of so many (mostly black) easterners into their world was a shock, both economically and culturally. The struggle to get and to keep a job—any job—became desperate, and many *habaneros* resented the presence of so many “uncultured” orientales in their city. The Cuban economy had been through many cyclical crises over the past thirty years, but none compared to the prolonged crisis of the 1930s.

One dramatic example of the vulnerability of migrant workers was the “Sabanaso crisis” in eastern Cuba from July 8 to 13, 1931.<sup>17</sup> Sabanaso, a small town in Oriente, was on the railway line between the large sugar mills at Delicias and Chaparra. The year 1931, of course, was a hard year in Cuba, and unemployment and poverty were endemic. Unemployed British West Indians and Haitians were trying to find work elsewhere on the island or, if possible, return to their home islands. On July 8 some five hundred British West Indians were “dumped” at the railway station at Sabanaso as they tried to get to Santiago to leave the island. The train to Santiago did not arrive, and

the train station manager asked for the assistance of a Mr. Neil Hone, a well-known manager of the sugar *colonia* El Canada in Sabanaso. Hone provided some rice and food for the men, and he asked the general manager of the Chaparra mill to provide a cow and water for the stranded workers. Cuban immigration officials soon arrived, but they did nothing. When a train did arrive, it took thirty Haitian workers back to Chaparra where they were to go to a company dock at Cayo Juan Claro and board a ship for Haiti.

The British West Indians at the station, however, were determined to leave for Santiago, and they remained in Sabanaso. At nights they slept in boxcars or on the train platform. Hone continued to provide food, milk, and coffee for the women and children, and he eventually persuaded fifty workers to return to Chaparra. Meanwhile, the problem was compounded because more workers kept arriving at the station from other nearby mills. Matters neared the point of violence when Cuban authorities announced that only Haitians and Jamaicans would be repatriated to their islands if they returned to Chaparra and Delicias: most of the people trapped at the station, however, were from the Lesser Antilles, and they were told they were not eligible for repatriation. A district military chief based at Delicias wanted to take the Jamaicans and Haitians back to Chaparra, and he asked Hone to help persuade the workers to go. Hone agreed to help on the condition he was left alone to persuade the men that returning to Chaparra and Delicias was the lesser of two evils. Some workers did return to the mills, but 150 men said they would rather walk to Santiago than return to unbearable working conditions. Hone explained to the British authorities that the problem was caused because neither the sugar company at Chaparra and Delicias nor the Cuban authorities had arranged for transportation of these workers, and as a result no one would take responsibility for them once they were abandoned in Sabanaso.

Five years later, near the town of Sabanaso itself, conditions for local workers remained desperate. Workers who had jobs in the mills, in construction, or on the railroads were in a fairly good position compared with fieldworkers. Fieldworkers, however, were more vulnerable. There were thousands of men and women scattered about in small towns and hamlets, many of them squatters with no title to the land they lived on. Wages were so low that people survived by cultivating a small plot to supplement their wages. According to one report, “not one of these men can support their families from the small pieces of land they cultivate and always depend on the work during the crop together with what they can produce in the way of foodstuffs from their land to see them through.”<sup>18</sup>

A similar situation took place in May 1931 when unemployed British West Indians in Camagüey tried to get to Santiago so they could return home or at least find work elsewhere. The British consul in Santiago estimated that there were over ten thousand Jamaicans in Camagüey “that want to go home right now.” There were twenty-six sugar mills in the province, with an average of one thousand British West Indian workers on each estate. The largest estates included the Morón, Ciego de Avila, Nuevitas, and the Florida mills. The cost of train fare from Camagüey to Santiago was more than most workers could afford, with the average train ticket costing around \$2.25 per person (which included their belongings, such as wash pans, bedding, and sewing machines). Bus fare from Camagüey City to Santiago was even more expensive, costing around \$3.00 per person. Workers from the smaller centers found it difficult to get to a main town or city because there was no reliable transportation. Many West Indians complained to the consulate that they had no clothes for the trip and that numerous people were forced to beg for food and shelter. Meanwhile, in Santiago, the problem was that there were not enough facilities to take care of the large number of destitute people arriving in the city. The British consul in Santiago complained that too many West Indians were arriving at his office and he had to pay the bus drivers who had brought them there because people could not pay the fares. Hostels and hotels were usually full and expensive. It cost around \$1.00 a day for a person to stay in Santiago, and since there was no assurance when or even if there would be an affordable boat ride back to their islands of origin, many hundreds of West Indians were trapped in the city with no work or shelter.<sup>19</sup>

Other West Indian workers, however, managed to remain in Cuba, despite their illegal status. Pantera, a Barbadian who arrived illegally in Cuba in 1916, said the key to survival was to stay single and keep on the move. His parents had wanted him to join the British army because that seemed the best way to find a better life away from a hopeless situation in Barbados. Pantera, however, went to Cuba instead. The docks at Bridgetown were full of labor recruiters tempting young men like Pantera to hop on a boat to Cuba, and since no one seemed to care if he had permission to leave or not, he boarded the ship. Once in Cuba, Pantera worked as a cane cutter, tobacco picker, and professional boxer, and in 1927 he joined the Communist Party. He claimed he never worried much about being legal in Cuba: he said the only proof he needed that he was Cuban was his 1927 Party membership card, which he pulled out of his pocket and proudly displayed.<sup>20</sup> Another Barbadian, Charles Yearwood, had no intention of going to Cuba at all. In 1924 he went to the dock at Bridgetown to see a friend off who was going

to Cuba. He boarded the ship to chat with his friend before departure, but, Yearwood said, he and his friend “got into the rum a bit,” and when he went back on deck to disembark, the ship had departed. He asked the captain to take him back to port, but he was told the ship would not turn around for one person. Yearwood arrived at the port of Cayo Juan Claro near the Chaparra and Delicias mills with nothing but his clothes and not a penny on him. He quickly found work cutting cane and never returned home.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Making of a Cuban Working Class, 1933–1940**

It was the profound economic and political crisis of the 1930s that fueled unprecedented mass mobilization, nationalist sentiment, and, in 1933, social revolution. The story of the Cuban revolution has been told elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> It was fueled by a mixture of nationalist, anti-imperialist, sometimes anticapitalist, and frequently racist and antiforeign sentiment. Between September 1933 and January 1934, a loose coalition of students, middle-class intellectuals, and disgruntled lower-rank soldiers ruled Cuba. This coalition was directed by a popular university professor, Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín. The Grau government promised a “new Cuba” with social justice for all classes and the abrogation of the Platt Amendment. In addition to social and political reforms, the new government created a Ministry of Labor and passed “nationalization of labor laws.” Popularly known as the “Fifty-Percent Law,” this legislation stipulated that a 50 percent quota of employees in industry, agriculture, and commerce be native-born Cuban citizens, that another 30 percent be naturalized citizens, and that the remaining 20 percent could be foreign legal residents. Sometimes the same law was referred to as the Eighty-Percent Law when native-born and naturalized Cuban citizens were included in the same category.<sup>23</sup> Grau’s government had promised “Cuba for Cubans,” and the nationalization of labor law was the concrete expression of that promise.

Grau’s government was overthrown in January 1934 by an equally loose but conservative coalition under Fulgencio Batista. Many people at the time wondered if Cuba would revert back to the old ways of doing politics, yet Batista understood that after 1933 governments could not afford to ignore nationalist sentiment and popular demands for jobs. While Grau’s more radical laws were shelved, between 1936 and 1940 Batista oversaw the successful implementation of nationalization of labor laws. The most dramatic example of its implementation was the mass expulsion of thousands of Haitian and West Indian workers between 1937 and 1940.<sup>24</sup> By 1940 Cuba’s sugar economy no longer depended upon foreign labor to cut and harvest cane.

There were two reasons why post-1933 governments successfully implemented the nationalization of labor laws. First, prior to 1933, state leaders had neither the political will nor the bureaucratic capacity to influence local labor markets. As long as companies brought in massive numbers of foreign workers, they had total control over whom they hired. But after 1927, and especially during the 1930s, the reduction in the size of Cuban sugar harvests meant that companies no longer needed to import foreign labor. There were enough workers within Cuba to bring in the harvests and maintain plantation infrastructure. In fact, while there was not exactly a shortage of labor during the 1930s, depending on local circumstances employers increasingly found themselves competing among themselves for the same workers. At the same time, workers competed with other workers for the same jobs, and sometimes workers could play off one employer against another. Companies were uncertain if they could find enough qualified workers when they needed them. In other words, the downturn in sugar production, combined with an uncertain labor supply, weakened employers' stranglehold over local labor markets, which in turn left those markets vulnerable to political interference from forces outside company control.

It was this conjuncture that explains why the nationalist labor laws were implemented successfully after 1933. Batista understood that Cuba had changed after 1933. Thereafter, to stay in power, governments had to respond (or at least appear to respond) to popular demands. No demand was more popular than "Cuba for Cubans." The practical problem was that the state had no reliable information about how many foreign workers were in the country (legally or illegally), where they lived, and what jobs they had. And even if the state had such information, it did not have the administrative or coercive power to implement labor legislation, especially in the eastern provinces. Once the flow of foreign labor had stopped, the effective "denationalization" of the workforce had come to end; the problem for Cuban nationalists, however, was that the population that remained in the country was still too multinational and multiethnic for their liking. It was this population that needed to be "nationalized." Under the watchful eye of Batista, after 1936 the state developed that power. Once Batista reorganized the army and police, he placed loyal followers in key administrative and supervisory positions, at both the national and local levels.<sup>25</sup> By 1937 Batista had entered his "populist phase," and his "redistributionist demagoguery" was accompanied by some real, if modest, reforms.<sup>26</sup> His most popular measure was the implementation of nationalist labor legislation. Backed by the army and police, and in alliance with the Communist Party and trade unions, Batista had both the

political support and coercive power necessary to compel employers to hire Cubans before foreigners. Unemployed Cubans, of course, were delighted. Even if they did not get a job, the idea that a powerful man like Batista was on their side gave the unemployed some hope. Employers grumbled, but there was little else they could do.

According to the labor legislation, once employers reached the quotas for the percentage of Cuban workers, they were obliged by law to maintain the percentages or risk incremental fines for every violation discovered. The 20 percent of foreigners employed must be legal residents of Cuba, though “the President of the Republic is authorised to make exception to this provision . . . in the case of non-resident foreigners whom it is necessary to employ each year in the cleaning and cutting of cane”—a clear recognition of the high numbers of illegal immigrants cutting and hauling cane in Cuba. Exceptions were made for technical workers who could not be replaced by native Cubans. Even more important, exemptions were made for anyone employed as a single worker, for fathers and children who worked in their own homes, and for domestic servants employed in private homes. As we will see, many British West Indians, and especially Jamaicans, fell into this latter category because many arrived in Cuba on their own initiatives as individual workers and not through the mediation of labor recruiters or contactors. Dismissals of foreign workers were to be prioritized in the following order: single foreigners were to be let go first, followed by married foreigners, then married foreigners with children, and foreigners married to Cuban women. Foreigners married to Cuban women and with children were the last dismissed.<sup>27</sup>

The problem was that in Cuba, in the short term, there were simply too few “Cuban” workers to fill all the available positions. If economic activity was not to be disrupted, foreign labor could not be replaced too quickly. This situation was especially true in eastern Cuba, where the expansion of the sugar industry had been especially notable since 1914.<sup>28</sup> The seasonal nature of work, combined with frequent competition for skilled labor among sugar companies, meant that the demand for labor could be stiff, and skilled contract workers could choose between employers. Employers and employees alike used the ambiguous status of “contract worker” to claim exemptions from the law, thus retaining a higher percentage of foreign workers on the payroll bill than the law, as narrowly interpreted, permitted. Contract workers, whether skilled or unskilled, changed occupations frequently, and since their employment was seasonal, whether or not they were classified as “skilled” depended on the season, their occupation at the time, the decision

of an individual employer, or the political context. An “unskilled” Barbadian cane cutter during the harvest was a skilled gardener, railroad worker, mechanic, or carpenter during the dead season; a skilled Jamaican mill worker could lose his job to a less skilled Cuban because state officials (including Batista’s military men) at the local level might compel an employer to fire the Jamaican.

A further complication was that a “Jamaican” worker who might have lived in Cuba for many years was for all intents and purposes as Cuban as anyone else, at least as far as he or she was concerned. After years in Cuba, many West Indians spoke Spanish as well as “native” Cubans, and since few poor rural people, whether native-born or not, had birth certificates or legal documentation of any kind, there was no reliable way to determine who was or was not a “foreigner.” Needless to say, the sugar companies and the workers themselves could exploit this situation to their own advantage, and laws passed in a distant Havana could easily be ignored. Since the sugar companies themselves could not be trusted to implement labor legislation that might hurt their immediate interests, the Cuban state needed to create institutions (backed up by Batista’s police and soldiers) that would ensure that the labor laws were enforced. Prior to the 1930s it simply did not matter much to people in the west if people who worked in the far-off sugar plantations of eastern Cuba were Cuban citizens or not. But once severe economic crisis and mass unemployment gripped the entire nation, the issue of the “Cubanness” of the working class went to the very top of the national political agenda.

The Cuban nationalist labor laws were based on the simple conviction that in order for the nation to exist, there must be a national workforce. The problem, therefore, was how to create one. Information about how many foreigners were in the country and where they lived and worked was equally hard to come by. Government immigration data were useful up to a point, especially for the ports at Havana and Santiago de Cuba, but many sugar companies brought in thousands of foreign workers through private ports. Companies were under no obligation to provide the government with detailed information on how many workers they employed or their occupations. Government immigration figures would always fall short of the actual number of foreigners in the country.

Clearly, before Cuban governments could implement the nationalization of labor legislation, they had to establish a bureaucracy and local and regional offices to collect basic information about the Cuban labor force. The state needed information about how many “Cuban” and “foreign” workers



were in the country, what their skills were, where they lived, and what the specific labor market needs of the sugar industry were at any given time and place. It was for this reason that between 1935 and 1940 the Cuban state established civil registries and labor exchanges throughout the country, but especially in the east. The Mendieta-Batista government of 1935–36 passed Law no. 148, which established labor exchanges in all five provinces. The law stated that exchanges were created for the “government to control the supply and demand of labor in order to improve the possibilities of employment and afford laborers professional orientation on a firm basis.”<sup>29</sup> The law stipulated that employers must advise the provincial labor exchange of all hiring and discharging of workers. When taking on new workers, employers were to hire unemployed laborers whose names were supplied by local exchanges. Employers were required to submit lists of all their employees, their technical qualifications, and their nationality. These lists would go to the director general of the Ministry of Labor, and the ministry would then determine whether or not there were enough Cubans to fill positions held by foreigners. Unions were required to inform the labor exchanges which of their members were fired, hired, and rehired. Employers could not hire workers who did not possess a labor exchange registration card, and violators of this provision were subject to fines ranging as high as \$500. By December 1935 the government claimed that a total of 94,346 unemployed workers had registered at the exchanges, with provincial breakdowns of 2,515 for Pinar del Rio, 6,990 for the Province of Havana, 11,370 for Matanzas, 17,849 for Santa Clara, 11,756 for Camagüey, and 43,866 for Oriente.<sup>30</sup>

With large numbers of foreign workers no longer entering the country, the sugar plantations had little choice but to use the labor exchanges to obtain the labor they needed. Mills constantly petitioned the labor exchanges for more labor, and managers often complained that they could not get enough workers. In Camagüey and Oriente, the Central Alto Cedro asked local exchanges for eight hundred workers, while the Central Boston requested five hundred laborers. The Tánamo mill asked for one hundred workers. On January 28, the Department of Labor declared that “a notice has been sent to all Labor Exchanges requesting them to speed measures to send any cane laborers they may have available to the mills. . . . The Labor Department is making every effort . . . to supply an adequate number of workers in its program to handle the crop exclusively with native Cubans and thereby reduce unemployment.”<sup>31</sup> The Labor Ministry ordered that foreign workers should not be registered at the exchanges, and the local authorities were told in no uncertain terms that there were to be no exceptions.<sup>32</sup> Local politics, how-

ever, were very personal. Many exchange officials were friends of local mill managers or were former employees of sugar companies (or might want a job with one in the future). These personal ties were often more compelling than directives from a distant Havana. Some mills bribed labor exchange officials, paying them to overlook the regulations and to place foreigners on the exchanges' lists of available workers.<sup>33</sup>

Another purpose of the exchanges was to gather information about the number of foreigners in the country. Workers were required to register at the exchanges, and they had to show documents indicating their legal status as either Cuban citizens or as foreigners. If workers did not possess any documents proving their legal status (a very frequent occurrence), their employers were required to provide that information. In one case, the local inspector for the Registro de Extranjeros in Holguín wrote to the manager of the Chaparra and Delicias mills and warned him that the mill would be fined if it failed to inform the registry of all foreign workers on the company payroll.<sup>34</sup> Of course, there were many delays in the establishment of the labor exchanges: officials needed to be appointed for each exchange, employers frequently did not comply by registering their workers at the exchanges, and it was not possible to force all workers to register if they did not want to. Though corruption and bribery would be a constant problem in the labor exchanges, Batista placed loyal army and police officers in the exchanges to work alongside civilian officials and to ensure that fines against employers were issued.

By 1937 labor exchanges, along with the Cuban army and police, were present throughout the country, and in that year Haitian and British West Indian workers became the target of a campaign of mass repatriations to their islands of origin or to any British territory that would take them. On January 19, 1937, the Cuban government under Fulgencio Batista announced plans to expel British West Indian and Haitian workers, and the armed forces were to enforce this order.<sup>35</sup> By the end of February, three large resettlement camps in the eastern provinces of Camagüey and Oriente held several thousand Haitian and Jamaican workers.<sup>36</sup> The British embassy complained about the treatment of their Jamaican and Barbadian subjects in these camps, though it was "a debatable point whether the British West Indians would be worse off roaming the countryside without food or shelter, or in a camp, fed and sheltered, but more or less a prisoner and probably subject to deplorable sanitary conditions." The Cuban Ministry of Labor informed the British embassy that these camps were for Haitians only, but the embassy dispatch concluded, "If the camps . . . are really intended for Haytians only, there must inevitably be great delay in disposing of the British West Indians, which in itself constitutes a

most thorny problem. . . . [G]iven the rough and ready army methods prevailing in the provinces, it is almost certain that if large numbers of Haytians are rounded up many British subjects will find themselves swept into the mob.”<sup>37</sup> Batista ordered the Rural Guard to expel Haitian and Jamaican workers from the sugar estates, while “encouraging” mill managers to hire Cubans in their place. By March 1937, thirty thousand Haitians were repatriated from Cuba, with an expected fifty thousand to follow shortly.<sup>38</sup> Thousands of Jamaicans, Barbadians, and other West Indians were subject to the same measures.

One of the central challenges of implementing the nationalization of labor legislation was the problem of documenting who was a foreigner and who was a “Cuban.” The cultural ambiguities, especially in the east, of determining who was “Cuban” were problem enough, but since very few poor people at all had any legal documentation whatsoever, it was nearly impossible for state authorities or employers to single out “Cubans” from “foreigners.” Since the early twentieth century, Cuban immigration officials had provided foreign residents of Cuba with  *carnets de extranjeros*  (foreign residency cards). As indicated earlier, for years the large sugar companies had brought in hundreds of thousands of workers through private ports, and companies were not obligated to provide workers with carnets de extranjero. After 1936, however, Cuban authorities strengthened the regulations about how carnets would be issued and how immigration laws would be enforced. One way the state did this was by placing Batista’s loyal followers in the army and police in the labor exchanges and municipal offices to oversee the distribution of the carnets. All foreigners were required to obtain a carnet at a cost of \$1.45. These cards were valid for one year and could be renewed again for the same price. Thereafter a new carnet would be issued for a period of five years; this new document, however, had a photograph of the holder along with his or her fingerprints. Failure to register or to renew the carnet within thirty days of expiration resulted in a fine of \$1.00. A similar fine was imposed for failure to notify authorities of a change of address. If a person did not pay these fines, they were to be deported. Destitute foreigners could obtain a free and temporary carnet if they could prove they were in fact destitute; if they managed to do this, they could remain in the country for six months with the possibility of a six-month extension if their condition had not improved. If after the second six months a person was still destitute, they were to be deported.<sup>39</sup>

One of the functions of the labor exchanges was to issue carnets to workers once they registered at the exchanges. Workers had to fill out a legal declaration stating their name, age, occupation, salary, employer, address, marital status, and nationality.<sup>40</sup> In addition to registering at the labor exchanges, all

Cubans and foreigners were to register at civil registry offices in the provincial capitals. The civil registries were the place where foreigners were to go to declare their intention of becoming Cuban citizens. A registration fee was charged to every person who registered at the civil registry offices. If migrant workers were caught without their carnet, they risked jail and deportation.

Of course, what people were supposed to do and what they did were frequently at odds. Two factors complicated matters when it came to issuing the carnets de extranjero. The nationalization of labor law stipulated that temporary carnets could be provided to newly arrived migrants who could not afford to pay the initial registration fee: the understanding was that they would pay the fee when they received their first paycheck. If workers stayed within the boundaries of the foreign enclaves, they did not need to have a carnet. But, of course, people rarely stayed in one place, especially when the “dead season” arrived. Before the more aggressive implementation of the nationalization of labor law in 1937, it was safer for both workers and employers to avoid the law altogether: for workers it made no sense to draw the attention of the police and army by requesting legal papers; for employers, their labor needs were too uncertain to worry about whether their employees were Cuban or not.

Provincial civil registries in Las Tunas, Puerto Padre, Delicias, Chaparra, Guantánamo, and Santiago for the years 1936 through 1940 provide some fascinating profiles about individual West Indian workers and how they lived in Cuba before they became Cuban citizens. One of the striking aspects of these profiles was how often people openly declared that they had been in the country illegally for years and that they possessed no legal documents of any kind. Fear of deportation did not seem to be a factor.<sup>41</sup> Many people brought witnesses with them to the registries who could corroborate that the claimants had regular employment and/or were respected members of their communities. It was not uncommon for claimants to highlight that they were married to “native” Cubans and that their children were Cuban. In terms of occupation, the majority of British West Indians who registered fell into the categories “contract laborer,” “domestic worker,” or small-scale traders of some kind.

As indicated above, the nationalization of labor legislation had identified certain kinds of contract labor that were not subject to the strict letter of the law. It appears that many British West Indian contract workers felt that their occupational status might permit them to remain in the country without becoming Cuban citizens. Another explanation for the willingness of undocumented British West Indians to come forward in late 1937 and 1938

was that the Cuban government's repatriation plans were stalled. An editorial in the influential sugar industry magazine *Revista Semanal Azucarera* wrote that "mass repatriations have struck a snag in the Cuban mill-owner's and planter's fear of a consequent scarcity of labor for the coming sugar crop. The plan, if carried out, will therefore be on a much smaller scale than originally conceived."<sup>42</sup> By 1938 the flow of migrant labor to Cuba had long stopped and sugar companies were uncertain if there were enough "Cubans" to supply their labor needs. Consequently, for a brief period both sugar companies and workers found ways to evade the labor laws, sometimes with the unofficial approval of local government officials.

An example of the complex situation faced by sugar workers in the east is provided by Charles Ray, who was employed at the huge Chaparra sugar mill in the late 1930s.

I began to work in the mill . . . at age fourteen or fifteen. When they established the eight-hour work day, I was a cart driver, and I remained driving carts on the sugar floor carrying sacks of sugar, which were big sacks, not like now where the sacks are small. . . . Being a cart driver wasn't so lucky, and you earned \$1.25. Then my father spoke with the American manager, and they took me from the sugar floor and sent me to work in the lab with the chemicals. . . . But when harvest time came, I don't remember which harvest it was, an American chemist came who did not speak Spanish. He was the chemical manager; the owners brought him from the United States. The lab was outside the mill in a large, two-story building where the overseer was below and the laboratory was on top. He chose one of the chemists who was working in the mill, a half Chinese. His father was Chinese, but he was Cuban because he was born in Cuba in the 1920s. Then he chose me to work with them there as an interpreter. . . . In 1937, when the English people went on their shift during crop time, as usual, a day went up to 6 P.M. The whistle would blow, and the English people would leave with their little bags over their shoulders. At each door there was a guard. "What are you, English? You cannot enter." So in 1937, they took out all English people, and there were only fifty left. They left to look for jobs in other parts. I continued because I was not working in the mill. . . . In 1937 and 1938 they were trying to identify who I was. Although they knew me since I was a boy, they were not sure if I was or wasn't born in Cuba, because I had been playing baseball and dominoes and all those things with them. They had to be sure before they said anything, and so they said nothing to me. But at the end of 1937, an American chemist called me and

said to me: “Listen to me, Charles, they are after you because the guard has already gone to tell the general manager that there is still an English person working at the mill, and that English person is you.” The Cuban chemist told me: “To cover you, you are going with me to Puerto Padre. I have friends there. I am going to change your birth certificate from English to Cuban.” . . . They only left the Cuban boys and the “Gallegos” or Spanish immigrants on the sugar plantation, because the “Gallegos” were Cubans. . . . But then they wanted to dismiss me, too, and then the American kept me on the job until the harvest ended. He told me: “I am going to keep you here until the harvest ends. When it ends, you cannot work here anymore because the general manager gave me the order to take away your job.”<sup>43</sup>

Ray’s mention of the Chinese workers in the mill indicates another set of tensions at the Chaparra mill. On April 4, 1936, Francisco Chiong wrote a letter of complaint to the mill’s general manager. Chiong claimed to represent the Chinese workers at the mill, and he argued that many of them had been unjustly released from their jobs because they were not Cubans. Chiong pointed out that he had lived in Cuba for thirty years. He had worked for the company as a labor contractor, and he had traveled to China and to Jamaica to recruit workers for the Chaparra Sugar Company. He had been a loyal worker for years, and now he was out of a job. Chinese workers, Chiong argued, were being replaced “by other individuals just as foreign as we are.” Chiong made a point of saying that he was not opposed to the Fifty-Percent Law in principle, but he felt that it was not applied consistently or fairly.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly the nationalization of labor laws had a serious impact on the lives of Haitian and British West Indian migrants. Haitians were the most vulnerable group of all: they had arrived in Cuba under the strict control of sugar companies, and they were employed almost exclusively as cane cutters and haulers. Workers’ housing (*bateyes*) within the sugar company enclaves was often segregated, with Haitians, British West Indians, Spaniards, Chinese, and Americans each living in their own areas. When Haitians were no longer needed at the end of each harvest, they could easily be located and deported. Between February and the summer of 1937, some 25,000 Haitians were deported.<sup>45</sup> By January 1939, another 5,700 Haitians had been repatriated.<sup>46</sup>

One of the striking features of these years was that there was virtually no serious opposition to the nationalist labor laws. Even the Communist Party and its trade union cadre, for whom working-class solidarity and class-based politics were ideological mantras, supported the nationalization of labor

laws and remained silent about the treatment of Haitians and West Indians in Cuba. The reasons for this silence are hard to identify with certainty. On the one hand, the party had a long history of antiracist struggle, and its membership included a high percentage of Afro-Cubans, so it is logical to assume that they could not support attacks on workers, Cuban or foreign. On the other hand, by 1938 the Communist Party was firmly allied with Batista, and as junior partners in his coalition it was not in their strategic interest to create divisions in what they regarded as an anti-oligarchic democratic alliance. To date, there is no hard evidence to suggest that the Party condoned the treatment of Haitians and West Indians or participated in excluding them from getting jobs. Yet there is also no evidence that party members, even at the local level, stood up for foreign workers. This silence is striking given that so many communists in the east had a long history of grassroots working-class organizing, and they were not known as timid people. Until more research is done, we can only surmise that the party's relative weakness within Batista's coalition, combined with its strict adherence to the principles of democratic centralism, kept its members silent.<sup>47</sup>

It is also important to note that by 1939 Batista felt secure enough to legalize the mainly communist Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba. The CTC was a confederation of unions, many of which had functioned underground for years. Communist Party organizers had provided the experience and discipline required to get a union off the ground and running; as a consequence, party union activists enjoyed widespread support among working-class people in general. Communist organizers, especially at the local level, were typically regarded as hardworking, selfless, and usually uncorruptible—the latter characteristic being no small feat in mid-twentieth-century Cuba. Now that the union movement was legal, however, its leaders had access to the highest levels of state power (and resources), and being a union member no longer meant a person was automatically a revolutionary or subversive. On the contrary, the two mass-based political parties to emerge after 1939—the Auténticos and the communists—had strong trade union federations that not only served to gain working-class support for each party but also legitimized the link between class, state, and nation.<sup>48</sup>

What all these changes meant for foreign workers in Cuba—whether they regarded themselves as “foreign” or not—was clear. The pressure on people to assimilate into an intensely nationalistic society where there was a strong tendency for native-born Cubans to resent foreigners, especially if they competed for the same jobs, was intense. Haitians in Cuba were by far the most vulnerable because their weak governments could provide no support for

its citizens abroad: they found some way to return to Haiti, were expelled from the country, or assimilated into society at large.<sup>49</sup> West Indians, however, were British subjects, and if they had not taken out Cuban citizenship, they were still nominally under the authority of the British Empire.<sup>50</sup> British imperial officials were keenly aware that the presence of so many of their colonial subjects in places like Cuba was both a problem for the empire and a source of tension with regional governments. In October 1943 the British ambassador to Cuba, Sir George Oglivie-Forbes, informed the Foreign Office that his embassy and consulates were inundated with West Indians seeking relief or financial help to return home.

The time is approaching when an important decision of policy should be made. Is it the desire of His Majesty's Government that the British West Indians born in Cuba should remain British subjects, or are they to be told that as there is no prospect of settlement in the British Empire, it is in their best interests to allow their British nationality to lapse and to become Cuban citizens? Such is the strength of nationalism here that there is already ample evidence of discrimination against naturalised Cubans and Cuban citizens born of alien parents, and I accordingly fear that to urge British West Indians against their wills to become Cuban citizens would not be an honourable course of action. . . . My own view is that while we should continue to give all possible protection and assistance to any who remain British subjects in Cuba or elsewhere, it is definitely undesirable that we should encourage children born in the British West Indian community in Cuba (or Santo Domingo) to maintain their British nationality if their intention is to continue to live in Cuba (or Santo Domingo).<sup>51</sup>

The ambassador did not want to encourage West Indians in Cuba to renounce their nationality. But to encourage people to stay in Cuba only provoked the Cuban government.

Another British dispatch written four years later was more blunt:

There is really no reason why a lot of these people should not merge with the people of the country [Cuba]. In Cuba there is little difference between the two standards of living [Jamaica and Cuba], nor need we be concerned very much about losing these people as British subjects—their loyalty to us is mainly sentimental, and personally I have found in practice they much prefer to serve Americans. They also cause a lot of unnecessary trouble by proclaiming their British allegiance in a manner that is offensive to the people of the country whom they despise.<sup>52</sup>



In 1950, according to Neil Hone, by this point British consul at Santiago, every West Indian on the relief list had been offered repatriation, “but very many prefer to remain in Cuba even without relief.” Able-bodied young men hoped to find work during the next sugar crop to save money for the trip home, but employers were even more reluctant to hire them and trade unions advocated for native-born workers to be employed first. Others simply did not have the money to leave the country, while many were too old to travel or had been away for so long they had no family to return to. Repatriation by sea was less feasible than before because the one line that took deck passengers—the Standard Fruit Company—had stopped its Santiago-Kingston run.<sup>53</sup> There were still many Haitians and West Indians who were illegal residents of the country, but that status now meant that a person would be subject to systematic job discrimination and, depending on the community, racism. By 1940, for Caribbean immigrants and their descendants the best way to get a secure job or access to land was to become a citizen.

So who are the Cuban people? Again, we know the answer to this question, at least in terms of the ethnic background of most Cubans. Perhaps the more meaningful, interesting, and difficult questions to answer are how, when, why, and under what conditions people become Cuban. Grand national (and nationalist) narratives tend to lead to equally grand conclusions. However correct those conclusions might be, in our hurry to make sweeping observations about national identity and state formation, we can forget to tell the stories (especially local ones) of people who do not always fit easily into those grand narratives. Clearly, given the dramatic change in both the size and composition of Cuba’s population, any answer to the question “Who are the Cuban people?” could not possibly be the same in 1940 as it was in 1900. Ancestry and ethnic background might tell us *where* people came from, but they do not tell us *who* people are.

Nationalism of all kinds tends to reduce “the people” to a homogeneous body with the same ethnic roots. In the Cuban case (as with so many others), reducing the Cuban people to a single ethnic background was always complicated by issues of race, class, region, and the struggles against slavery and colonialism. After independence, the story got even more complicated thanks to the political economy of sugar and labor migration. As much as Cuban nationalists wanted to ground Cuban identity in past struggles for nationhood and, more problematically, in a nonracial sense of *cubanidad*, the reality they faced was that the island’s population was too multiracial,

multiethnic, and multinational for their liking. As long as Cuba depended on sugar, and as long as harvesting sugar depended on foreign labor, there was little nationalists could do to alleviate their anxiety about the future of “the Cuban nation.” While there were a few radical labor organizers and intellectuals who argued against racist and ethno-centric nationalism, their voices were drowned out by those who saw foreign capital—but especially foreign black labor—as the greatest threat to “the Cuban people.”

Thanks to the world depression and the downturn in sugar production in the late 1920s and 1930s, nationalist state leaders could realize their dream of “nationalizing” the Cuban working class. Once sugar companies, especially in the east, no longer needed foreign labor to cut and haul cane, post-1933 governments were no longer under the same intense pressure to make immigration policy conform to company needs. After the revolutionary mass mobilizations of the early 1930s, Cuban politics would never be the same. Thereafter, political leaders of almost every stripe—including many communists and otherwise revolutionary figures—either supported or turned a blind eye to the state-sponsored attack on Haitians and West Indians. What had started as a series of “revolutionary” laws to nationalize the Cuban labor force became, by 1940, constitutional edicts. The state now had the power to grant or deny citizenship by enforcing who could get a job and who could not. Being—or at least claiming to be—a “native” Cuban now mattered a great deal. To what degree people were actually free to become Cuban or not very much depended on a combination of local circumstances, personal history, and ultimately state power.

The significance of the Constitution of 1940 was that Cuba became, judicially speaking, a nation-state.<sup>54</sup> Equally significant was that in the years leading up to the passing of the constitution, the coercive power of the state reached almost every corner of the country. Nominally national governments in Havana could pass, and enforce, legislation throughout the entire country. The abrogation of the Platt Amendment in 1934 symbolized the formal end to American neocolonial power in Cuba. Informally, of course, a strong argument can be made that Cuba remained a neocolony up to the revolution of 1959. But nation-states can still be neocolonies of one kind or another.<sup>55</sup> And nationalism, no matter how radical in either discourse or practice, can still accommodate itself to powerful external forces, be they political, cultural, or economic. The real and symbolic importance of the constitutional consensus of 1940 was that for the first time in its history the Cuban nation was sovereign, at least over its own population. How state leaders used and abused that sovereignty was the central political bone of contention for the next twenty years.

What is indisputable, however, is that in the six years leading up to 1940 and afterward, Cuban governments exercised the coercive power of the state to help make a Cuban working class. By making this argument, I in no way want to diminish or deny that Cuban and foreign workers themselves created their own class identities through struggle and sacrifice. I am not suggesting that some kind of Foucauldian repressive state discourse took hold in Cuba between 1933 and 1940 and molded a Cuban working class from on high. Cuba's long history of subaltern rebellion and militant class struggle was too powerful to be smothered or co-opted by any single nationalist discourse. We also have some—but not enough—information about the role Haitian and West Indian workers played in the class and revolutionary struggles of the 1920s and 1930s. What I hope to have shown in this chapter, though, is that in order to better understand what it meant to be Cuban during the republican period, we need to appreciate the complex interplay between population history, class, and state formation.

## Notes

This chapter stems from research that also resulted in Robert Whitney and Graciela Chailloux, *Subjects or Citizens: British Caribbean Workers in Cuba, 1900–1960* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). I would like to thank Dr. Graciela Chailloux from the Casa de Altos Estudios Fernando Ortiz for her collaboration on the research for this chapter and for the forthcoming book. She is, of course, not responsible for any of the arguments or conclusions in either.

1. On Spanish migration to Cuba, see Sánchez Alonso, *Las causas de la emigración española*, 116–17, 142–51; Moya, “Spanish Emigration to Cuba and Argentina,” 7.

2. For the published work on British West Indian migration to Cuba, see Pérez de la Riva, “Cuba y la migración antillana, 1900–1931,” 3–75; Knight, “Jamaican Migrants and the Cuban Sugar Industry, 1900–1934,” 94–114. Fortunately, recent and pioneering doctoral dissertations by Jorge Giovannetti, Marc Mcleod, and Cadence Wynter have provided a more complete and nuanced picture of British West Indian life in Cuba. See Giovannetti, “Black British Subjects in Cuba: Race, Ethnicity, Nation, and Identity in the Migration Experience”; Mcleod, “Undesirable Aliens: Haitian and British West Indian Workers in Cuba, 1898–1940”; Wynter, “Jamaican Labor Migration to Cuba, 1885–1930 in the Caribbean Context.” The published works are Giovannetti, “The Elusive Organization of ‘Identity,’” 1–27, 231; Chailloux Laffita and Whitney, “British Subjects y Pichones en Cuba”; and Whitney and Chailloux Laffita, “West Indian Migrants to Cuba and Their Descendants,” 133–54.

3. Mcleod, “Undesirable Aliens: Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers in Cuba, 1898–1940,” 7.

4. The first figure is taken from McLean Petras, *Jamaican Labour Migration*, 68. The figure on illegal British West Indian residents is from “Repatriation of British West

Indians: British West Indian Relief in Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Hayti,” by M. E. Vi- bert, Consular Department, Foreign Office, January 14, 1948, National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NA), /FO/369/3962/117907. These figures do not include the children of first-generation immigrants. There are, to our knowledge, no reliable figures on the number of Haitians who remained in Cuba after 1940.

5. The phrase “neither peasants nor proletarians” is taken from Frucht, “A Caribbean Social Type.”

6. It is still possible today to meet people who arrived in Cuba between 1916 and the 1950s who never got citizenship papers. In effect, before they were provided with proper identification papers from the revolutionary government after 1959, they had lived illegally in Cuba and were not legally Cuban.

7. Holt, “Slavery and Freedom in the Atlantic World,” 33–44; Trouillot, “Caribbean: Sociocultural Aspects,” 1484–88.

8. The notion of “fragmented nationalism,” of course, is borrowed from Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*.

9. On the issue of Cuban national identity, see Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*; Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams*; Ibarra, *Un análisis psicosocial del cubano, 1898–1925*; Torres-Cuevas, “En busca de la cubanidad.”

10. For some representative works expressing these views, see Carrión, “El desenvolvimiento social de Cuba en los últimos veinte años”; Trelles, “El progreso (1902 a 1905) y el retroceso (1906 a 1922) de la República de Cuba”; Guerra y Sánchez, *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean*; Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*; Maestri, *Capitalismo y anticapitalismo*; Maestri, *Latifundismo en la economía cubana*; Arrendondo, *Cuba, tierra indefensa*.

11. Andrews, “Black Workers in the Export Years: Latin America, 1880–1930,” 7–29.

12. Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*; Chomsky, “‘Barbados or Canada?,” 415–62; Chomsky, “The Aftermath of Repression: Race and Nation in Cuba after 1912.”

13. Swanger, “Lands of Rebellion: Oriente and Escambray Encountering Cuban State Formation, 1934–1974.”

14. Hoernel, “Sugar and Social Change in Oriente, 1898–1946”; Pérez, *Lords of the Mountain: Social Banditry and Peasant Protest in Cuba, 1878–1919*.

15. An excellent analysis of the Cuban sugar industry during this period is Dye, *Cuban Sugar in the Age of Mass Production*.

16. For economic and social conditions in the late 1920s and 1930s, see Buell et al., *Problems of the New Cuba*, and República de Cuba, *Adaptación de Cuba a las condiciones económicas actuales*.

17. The information in this and the following paragraph is summarized from British Legation to Neil Hone, Colonia “El Canada,” Sabanaso, Oriente, July 16, 1931: Enclosure, “Detailed account of the happenings from the 8th to the 13th of July (1931) with reference to the dumping of some 500 men in Sabanaso from Chaparra,” NA/FO/1001/1.

18. Enclosure No. 2: Letter from Mr. Neil Hone, Sabanaso, Oriente to Mr. T. I. Rees, British Consul General, Havana, October 28, 1936, Despatch No. 158, from the British Legation, Havana, to the Right Honourable Sr. Anthony Eden, November 9, 1936. NA/CO/318/424/4.

19. F. E. Kezar, British Vice-Consulate, Camagüey, to the British Legation, Havana, May 5, 1931, Jamaican Archives (hereafter JA), 1B/5/77/55/1931.

20. Chailloux and Whitney, interview with Pantera, Chaparra, June 13, 2002. When Pantera discovered that I was Canadian, he asked if he could speak English with me. He spoke with a strong Barbadian accent. There was considerable debate about Pantera's age. He claimed he was 103, but some of the nurses said he was "only" around 98. What is certain is that several of the other residents in the home who were in their eighties said they knew "Pantera" when they were children.

21. Chailloux and Whitney, interview with Charles Yearwood, Delicias, June 12, 2002.

22. The main works on the Cuban revolution of 1933 are Lumen, *La revolución cubana*; Roa García, *La revolución del 30 se fue a bolina*; Aguilar, *Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution*; Tabares del Real, *La revolución del 30: Sus dos últimos años*; Raby, *The Cuban Pre-Revolution of 1933: An Analysis*; Soto, *La revolución del 33*; Osa, *Crónica del año 33*; Carrillo, *Cuba 1933: Students, Yankees, and Soldiers*; and Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba*.

23. The full text of the law can be found in "Nationalization of Labor in Cuba," Enclosure 8 to Dispatch 224, November 14, 1933, from the embassy in Cuba to the secretary of state, in Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records, 1930–39 (hereafter CUSDPR), RG 84, reel 11, 1933. According to a U.S. embassy report on the nationalization of labor law in Cuba, the Cuban decrees were part of a wave of nationalist legislation throughout Latin America. The report gave the following percentages: El Salvador, 80, Guatemala, 75, Venezuela, 75, Brazil, 66, Chile, 85, Mexico, 90, Nicaragua, 75, Uruguay, 80, Peru, 80, Dominican Republic, 70, Haiti, retail trade restricted to Haitian citizens, Panama, 75, Ecuador, 80, Bolivia, 85, and Cuba, 50. See Memorandum to the Ambassador, Havana, January 19, 1938, in CUSDPR, RG 84, reel 50. For an academic analysis of Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s, see Rock, ed., *Latin America in the 1940s*; Bethell and Roxborough, eds., *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948*.

24. Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 155.

25. Pérez, *Army and Politics in Cuba, 1898–1958*.

26. The phrase "redistributionist demagoguery" is taken from Vilas, "Latin American Populism: A Structural Approach," 389–420. On Batista's populist phase, see Whitney, *State and Revolution*, chapters 6 and 7.

27. "Nationalization of Labor in Cuba," Enclosure 8 to Dispatch 224, November 14, 1933, from the Embassy in Cuba to the Secretary of State, in CUSDPR, RG 84, reel 11, 1933.

28. Hoernel, "Sugar and Social Change in Oriente, 1898–1946."

29. Hoernel, "Sugar and Social Change in Oriente, 1898–1946."

30. H. Freeman Mathews, First Secretary of the Embassy to the Department of State, "94,346 unemployed workers registered at the Bolsas de Trabajo as of November 30, 1936," Dispatch No. 7786, December 9, 1936, in CUSDPR, RG 84, reel 34.

31. "Sugar Mills Ask Labor Exchanges for Field Help," *Havana Post*, January 28, 1937, 12.

32. "Idle in Camagüey Forced to Work," *Havana Post*, February 11, 1937, 1.

33. "Labor Situation in Cuba and Repatriation of British West Indians." February 11, 1937, NA/CO/318/424/4.
34. Luis Rodríguez to the General Administration of the Chaparra and Delicias Mills, Holguín, May 16, 1936, in Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Tunas, Fondo 5: Cuban American Sugar Mills Company, Exp. 456, Leg. 39.
35. *Havana Post*, January 20, 1937, 1; *Havana Post*, January 28, 1937, 12.
36. British Vice-Consul at Santiago (Haydock-Wilson) to the Consul General at Havana, February 10, 1937, NA/CO/318/424/4; "The Labor Situation in Cuba"; *Havana Post*, February 23, 1937, 1; *Havana Post*, April 6, 1937, 1.
37. Mr. Rees to Mr. Eden, Havana, February 20, 1937, Enclosure Document 21, "The Labor Situation in Cuba and the British West Indies," NA/FO/A/1864/65/14.
38. Grant Watson (Havana) to the Foreign Office, July 7, 1937, NA/CO/318/424/5.
39. This information is summarized from "Report on the Present Condition of the British West Indian Community in Cuba," by F. A. Stockdale, July 21, 1943, NA/CO/318/453/14/119685.
40. A large collection of these legal declarations are located in the Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Tunas, Fondo 5: Cuban-American Sugar Mills Company.
41. It is interesting to note that Haitian names rarely appear in the civil registry volumes, whereas English names are very common.
42. "Los antillanos," *Revista Semanal Azucarera*, October 22, 1937, 59.
43. Interview with Charles Ray (born in Saint Lucia in 1919 and in Cuba since 1924), interviewed in Guantánamo, October 8, 2001.
44. Francisco Chiong to the General Manager, Chaparra, April 4, 1936, in Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Tunas, Fondo 5: Cuban-American Sugar Mills Company, Exp. 456, Leg. 39.
45. Mathews to the Secretary of State, "Repatriation of Haitians and Jamaicans," Havana, August 18, 1937, in CUSDPR, reel 43.
46. Mcleod, "Undesirable Aliens," 266.
47. On the alliance between Batista and the Communist Party of Cuba, see Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba*, chapter 7; Argote-Freyre, *Fulgencio Batista*, chapter 13; Simms, "Cuban Labor and the Communist Party, 1937-1958: An Interpretation," 43-58; García Montes and Alonso Ávila, *Historia del partido comunista de Cuba*; Goldenberg, "The Rise and Fall of a Party: The Cuban CP (1925-59)," 61-80. On the Communist Party's justification of its position, as well as its silence on the treatment of foreign labor, see Roca, *Por la igualdad de todos los cubanos*, and Roca, *Las experiencias de Cuba*.
48. For an informative contemporary analysis of the Cuban labor movement, see United States Office of Strategic Services, *The Political Significance and Influence of the Labor Movement in Latin America: A Preliminary Survey: Cuba*, Washington, D.C., September 18, 1945, R&A, no. 3,076.1. For a contemporary communist perspective, see Roca and Peña, *La colaboración entre obreros y patronos*. Also see Riera Hernández, *Historial obrero cubano, 1574-1965*; Sims, "Cuban Labor and the Communist Party, 1937-1958: An Interpretation," 43-58; and Sims, "Collapse of the House of Labor: Ideological Divisions in the Cuban Labor Movement," 123-47.

49. This is not to say that Haitians and their descendants have not had a large impact on Cuban—and especially eastern Cuban—society. We certainly know that many local religious ceremonies, patterns of dress, musical forms, and colloquial expressions have their origins in Haitian culture. But much more research is required if we are going to get a better picture of the Haitian influence in Cuba. An excellent, if short, study is Espronceda Amor, *Parentesco, inmigración y comunidad: Una visión del caso haitiano*. Also see Gómez Navia, “Lo Haitiano en lo Cubano.”

50. The question of the relationship between West Indians as British subjects and the British Empire will be dealt with at length in Whitney, *Caribbean Connections*.

51. Questions for Discussion with the Foreign Office at Meeting on the 20th of October, 1943, NA/CO/318/453/14.

52. Repatriation of British West Indians: “British West Indian Relief in Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Hayti,” by M. E. Vibert, Consular Department, Foreign Office, January 14, 1948, NA/FO/369/3962/117907.

53. British Vice-Consulate (Neil Hone), Santiago de Cuba, to the British Embassy, Havana, April 20, 1950, NA/FO/369/4363.

54. For some observations on this issue, see Álvarez Martens, “La Constitución de 1940 es una lección de madurez nacional”; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Report on Cuba*; Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*.

55. For some observations on this theme, see Cooper, “Empire Multiplied,” 247–72; Cooper and Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*; and Calhoun, Cooper, and Moore, eds., *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*.

