

Book Review

– *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean*, by Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, Princeton University Press, 2019

“Genealogy is grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary,” Michel Foucault once said. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof has brilliantly shown us how can it be done. He spent ten years following the slim traces of the lives of his characters through lands and seas, in dusty archival collections, and even the internet (he uses genealogical websites as sources). He constructs a microhistory – “micro-history set in motion” (283, n.9) – that recounts the transnational story of a small group of black Cuban and Puerto Rican migrant workers who played important roles in the fighting against the Spanish empire in Cuba in the last third of nineteenth century and the United States’ dominion in the early-twentieth century. This group of characters – composed of people from “humble” beginnings who achieved respectability through education or work (typesetters, tobacco workers, midwives) – were José Martí’s disciples and allies, and after his death the “defenders” of his idea of a free Cuba with “no whites nor blacks, only Cubans.” (4) These individuals from different backgrounds came together in New York City but maintained those long distance, transnational ties that helped in rallying support through the Caribbean and Central America for Cuba’s liberation efforts.

His text can be located as part of an effort to examine the complexities of racial experiences in Cuba at the turn of nineteenth century, along works such as Melina Pappademos’s *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic* and Jorge Giovannetti’s *Black British Migrants in Cuba*. Hoffnung-Garskof traces the “radial lines” of the lives of several individuals not necessarily representative but different enough to give an idea of the complexities of historical actors and processes. Their stories allowed him to put the “migrating while black” (8) (and, as Ada Ferrer has rightly pointed out, “Latino”) experiences in the forefront. He illustrates how hybridization can occur when people of different cultures come into close contact and how revolutionary politics are affected by those encounters. For example, he shows how Cuban and Puerto Rican interactions with African Americans influenced their understanding of American so-

ciety and politics. This, in turn, affected how Cubans and Puerto Ricans approached Americans help with the liberation struggle, becoming more cautious and sceptical of Yankees' boastful proclamations. He also reveals how his historical actors had a pragmatic understanding of politics. They did not manage a fixed idea of social justice but a fluid concept that was in constant negotiation. In doing so, he highlights the class and racial lines along which the Cuban community in New York City – especially those involved in the liberation struggle – divided. Finally, the author is well-aware of the gender bias in his historical sources. He makes the reader aware of it and tries to imagine beyond what is written in the documents to peek at women's roles in the community and the different organizations these migrants created. As he points out, they were physically present but not recorded.

From the outset we know that this is a narrative history. The author admittedly did not openly engage in any historiographical debate; but they are there. For example, by showing and emphasizing how divergent the experiences of his Cuban and Puerto Rican characters were regarding race under the same imperial powers (Spain first, then the United States), he disputes and belies the "repeating island" characterization of the Caribbean region. But Hoffnung-Garskof's text is much more than an imaginative story of black Caribbean migrants' in New York City and their participation in the Cuban liberation struggle. His is a model of a theoretically informed approach to historical writing, especially in face of slim documentation. As mentioned before, his is a narrative and takes his cue from James Goodman (with whom the author studied). This is not a straight, factual history. Here the documents do not speak, the story was not out there. On the contrary, it is the author who consciously composes the story, who decided the beginnings, the middle, and the three different possible endings for his story. It is a powerful example of what Hayden White called "the fictions of factual representation." Nonetheless, I am not convinced that Hoffnung-Garskof embraces the full fledge of the historiographical, methodological, but most importantly, ethical repercussions and significance of this approach as Goodman did in his *Stories of Scottsboro* – the possibility of constructing a positive ethics from non-traditional epistemological positionings regarding the writing of history.

Notably, the blossoming consumer society of the era was not very evident in his story. For example, the epigraph of chapter three alludes to the burgeoning industrialization of the city; however, that disappears in the narrative. He also acknowledges how the flourishing publishing industry directed toward Latin America to sell goods and to extol the "introduction of modern industrial methods and products" (194) was used as a platform by people like Martí to promote the cultural and political unity of the region. But closer to home, how did the emergent consumer culture influence their identity construction and their ideas of citizenship, nationhood, and belonging? Works like Lawrence Glickman's *A Living Wage*, in which he shows how after the Civil War workers' claims of a "living wage" encapsulated a "consumerist" turn; and Charles

McGovern's *Sold American*, which shows how consumption became, in the collective imagination, a sort of citizenship participation, come to mind as possible interpretative models.

Also, I would have appreciated to see more developed the issues of dress that the author mentions in several passages. Hoffnung-Garskof hints to the role of dress in the construction of respectable masculine – and feminine? – identities but does not expand on it. This might have helped examine consumer culture impact on identity construction.

It is impossible to do justice to such well-researched, skilfully crafted, beautifully written, and thought-provoking book as Hoffnung-Garskof's in a short review. None of the brief points mentioned before diminishes the value of his text. Scholars in Cuban, Caribbean, and Latin American history/studies will find in *Racial Migrations* a model of research and writing, and a source for future research.

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