

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 5
Issue 4 Volume 5, Issue 4 (Fall 1996)

Article 7

9-1-1996

Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*

Astrid Cubano

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Cubano, Astrid. "Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 5, 4 (1996): 480. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol5/iss4/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912. By Aline Helg. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xii + 361 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

In this excellent study, Aline Helg examines the problem of white racism in Cuba from the years immediately following the abolition of slavery in 1886 to the tragic culmination of the anti-black panic of 1912 in the indiscriminate killing of thousands of Afro-Cubans by Cuban government military forces. Helg's revision of journals and censuses confirms that post-emancipation Cuba continued to be divided along racial lines. In spite of the Spanish government's support of the integration of freed slaves into society, segregation was rampant.

While the black population was underrepresented in many areas, namely the most attractive jobs and professions, Helg's study of memoirs of the Cuban Independence War convincingly strengthens the idea that Afro-Cubans were in fact overrepresented among soldiers fighting to free Cuba from Spanish domination. Participation in the war raised blacks' expectations about their future in a new free Cuba built according to José Martí's ideals of equality and justice. But white supremacist discourse, disguised in the form of the "myth of Cuban racial equality," continued to hinder a balanced nation-building process. Afro-Cuban attempts to create a black response based on self-esteem and respect for African cultural roots faced repression. Black

culture seems to have been vilified by whites and educated Afro-Cubans on the basis of unconfirmed accusations of crimes committed as part of *brujería* rites.

Helg's evidence revealing the national dimensions of the Partido Independiente de Color (victim of the 1912 repression) and the debates leading to the party's birth definitively correct the views that have reduced this movement to an isolated outburst of dissatisfied black office seekers. Helg reveals the growing panic in Cuba at that time in her outstanding reconstruction of pre-1912 racial tensions based on an impressive number of journalistic and judicial testimonies. Ultimately, the massacre appears connected to President Gómez's maneuvers to obtain reelection (p. 202). Gómez's political ambitions led him to misinterpret the black "armed protest" as a deliberate attack on the white population. In so doing, Gómez justified the intervention of U.S. marines in 1912 to protect U.S. interests, as well as his own government's military action undertaken to supposedly save the whites from a threat Gómez himself had helped induce.

The collective experience of racism at the hands of whites led blacks to bond more closely in solidarity. Yet the efforts of black leaders to promote their own group's interests appear to have been consistently contaminated by stereotypes of the barbaric black *brujo* and rapist created by the exaggerations of the white press. Successful and educated black leaders stressed the need to educate blacks and have them adopt Western cultural patterns. On the other hand, those defending the Afro-Cuban cultural cause seemed unconcerned for the mass of rural blacks in need of a more equitable land distribution (p. 127). A well-balanced program distributing attention between blacks' historic need for economic betterment and their need to accept their cultural heritage with pride and dignity was simply not available.

In her conclusion, Helg explains the behavior of white Cubans in convincing psychological terms, seeing them as "trapped between U.S. imperialism and Spanish immigrants from above and restless Afro-Cubans from below" (p. 238). The Cuban political elite was insecure enough to "direct their resentment and frustration against the racial minority as a means of recovering self-confidence in their own superiority" (p. 238). But rather than becoming stronger, Cubans grew less capable of overcoming U.S. domination, based as it was on the same ideas of racial superiority.

Astrid Cubano
Department of History
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras