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Herrnan L. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico*

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A Black Soldier's Story: The Narrative of Ricardo Batrell and the Cuban War of Independence. Edited and translated by Mark A. Sanders. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. lxix + 240 pp. Illustrations, map, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.)

Ricardo Batrell's narrative is well known among Cuban scholars but has remained hidden from the view of monolingual Anglophone researchers for over a century. Thankfully, Mark Sanders now has made this important narrative available in English. While the tide has begun to turn in recent scholarship, histories of the Cuban War of Independence long have been dominated by the voices of white soldiers. The relative silence of Afro-Cuban voices in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has posed a problem for historians in comprehending the black experience in war-torn Cuba. Mindful of this issue, Sanders includes a detailed introduction that contextualizes both a general history of Cuba's black population and the experiences of Afro-Cuban soldiers in the movements for Cuban independence, which in turn provides critical background information that illuminates Batrell's perspective on the war. For Batrell and other Afro-Cubans, the ideals of a "Cuba Libre" represented democracy and egalitarianism, making their fight for Cuba's independence "an intensely racial one" (p. x).

Beyond Sander's well-crafted introduction, the translated narrative is displayed in a similar manner to Batrell's original account; it is divided into three chapters, each one representing the years of his involvement in the war between 1896 and 1898. Sanders is candid about his translation methodology and explains that, despite Batrell's "highly idiomatic, Cuban style Spanish," he tried to remain true to Batrell's original voice, which displays his sense of "intensity and immediacy" (p. lxvii). Batrell's engaging prose has been well studied by Cuban historians, and now English-language readers have access to one of the few black voices in the Cuban War for Independence.

Batrell's autobiography offers an account of the war that not only presents the difficulties of combat, but also the additional problems experienced by soldiers of African descent living in a racialized society. Although Batrell was born free through the free-womb law of 1870, his mother likely was enslaved, and his account demonstrates consciousness of the racial inequalities that plagued Cuban society at that time. Batrell writes that black soldiers frequently were denied promotions and equal treatment because of "envy and an undemocratic spirit in the revolutionary camps" (p. 40). Since the release of the pivotal Tannenbaum thesis, which argued that Latin American countries promoted greater degrees of tolerance toward their black populations, some scholars have used Cuba and Brazil as primary examples of nations that easily integrated their sizable black populations. Batrell's narrative, however, speaks against the assumption that Latin American societies were more flexible in their inclusion of racial minorities. Despite Batrell's belief that "Cuba Libre" represented fraternity and equality among the races, the reality of segregation and racism were paramount, and he reveals

that this hatred plagued his own unit because the "commanding officer and his soldiers were black" (p. 25).

The English language translation of Batrell's narrative provides a new vantage point for Atlantic historians to engage in comparative histories regarding the racial attitudes of post-emancipation societies. The relative dearth of black Atlantic voices prevented scholars from linking black peoples in the Western hemisphere with any contributions beyond their enslaved labor. By drawing upon this important primary source, scholars in various disciplines have access to one of the hidden voices of black Atlantic autobiography. Sander's translation serves as an invitation to his U.S. counterparts to understand the Afro-Latin American experience. If for nothing but symbolic value, it is noteworthy that an English professor has made the narrative of an Afro-Cuban soldier available in English. Such an event suggests that the time is ripe for scholars to reach across the aisles and promote collaborative activities that reveal the intricately connected histories of Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America. Ricardo Batrell's narrative is a welcome addition to this campaign.

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