

Mata, Iacy Maia  
*Conspirações da raça de cor:*  
escravidão, liberdade e tensões raciais  
em Santiago de Cuba (1864-1881)

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The complicated relationship between people of color and Latin American nationalist movements has been at the center of a large body of historiographic research. Some of the questions that scholars have tackled have been: what made people of color participate in these movements? How did they shape them? And why did they endorse nationalist ideologies that touted racial harmony and that white elites would come to use as a means to silence race-based claims? Were people of color being co-opted by white elites, or did they succeed in shaping the general tenor of nationalist movements and ideologies? Historians of Cuba have engaged in these conversations, even though Cuba was a chronological outlier relative to the other Spanish colonies in the Americas, gaining its independence only in 1898. The paradox that makes Cuba a particularly interesting topic of research is why the largest sugar producer for the global market could become home to a nationalist ideal of racial confraternity at a time when scientific racism had become the ideological ballast for European second empires in Asia and Africa, and for US South Jim Crow laws. Drawing on rich research from Cuban and Spanish archives and weaving a beautiful narrative that places front and center the voices and actions of people of color themselves, Iacy Maia Mata's monograph offers new insights into these questions.

Earlier studies of racial confraternity in Cuba focused particularly on the military experience during the protracted War of Independence against Spain (1868-1898). Scholars and intellectuals as far back as José Martí argued that the military *esprit de corps* that developed among pro-independence insurgents

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across official color lines served as a catalyst for radical ideologies of national and racial inclusion. But Mata argues that there are archival traces of a popular political culture in Santiago that appears to have pre-existed the 1868 military effort. By introducing a new chronological threshold for the emergence of ideologies of racial equality within Cuba, Mata is not just setting the record straight. She is also suggesting that Santiago's people of color had considered equality before the small landholding liberal elites in the neighboring province of Puerto Principe initiated the Independence War.

Mata's goal is to trace the origins of Santiago's popular political culture and to explain how, between the mid-1860s and the early 1880s, the local population of color overcame status divisions and created bonds and solidarities that reached their full expression in the idea of a unified *raza de color*. This particular vision of a race-centered political community was aligned with the nationalist cause of a free Cuba, Mata argues. As she aptly and pithily puts it, Santiago's people of color shifted from being in the early 1860s *la clase de color*, an official label that the Spanish colonial authorities affixed onto them, to being *la raza de color*, a term that intellectuals, and political and military leaders of color started to use to self-identify in the early 1880s.

Throughout most of its colonial existence, Santiago de Cuba, a province located on the eastern side of the island, had been a colonial borderland – a marginal player in imperial politics and the site of little investment in large-scale plantation agriculture. Refugees from the Haitian Revolution who migrated to this region around 1803 started coffee plantations, many of which went bust by the early 1840s. Until the late 1850s, the main sources of local revenue were livestock production, some coffee and tobacco cultivation, and copper mining (which authorities had conceded to an English company). As a result of Santiago's location on the outskirts of sugar's domain, small landholding remained much more common here than on the west-central part of the island. Furthermore, Santiago also stood out among other Cuban provinces for the relatively larger demographic weight of the people of color. At the beginning of the 1860s, many of them were small landowners, and some of them were small slaveholders. It was this population that began to mobilize politically toward the beginnings of the 1860s, the author argues, in response to local economic developments and international anti-slavery movements.

By the early 1860s, sugar started to take deeper roots and coffee production picked up again in Santiago. As a result, plantations began to encroach upon areas where small landholders or land renters cultivated tobacco, leaving

the population of color discontent. Furthermore, by the mid-1860s, Santiago would have received news and rumors about emancipation in the US South. The local population would have also long been aware of British agitation against slavery and the slave trade to the Spanish Empire (because of the proximity of Jamaica) and of Haiti's reputation as a republic built out of a successful slave revolution. Through careful reading of criminal and judicial records, Mata retrieves how this news impacted everyday life among slaves and free people of color and what they did with it: whether it was the subtle and ironic parade of a Haitian flag inscribed with the word Hope or the use of pro-republican anti-slavery and anti-discrimination vocabulary, Mata argues, political talk was widespread in the city and in the rural areas before 1868.

Vernacular political talk culminated in a series of conspiracies that transpired between 1864 and 1868 in the province of Santiago and in adjacent areas. Mata reads the evidence for these conspiracies carefully, tracing the participants' objectives and the alliances that emerged between slaves, free people of color, and whites. The *desiderata* included an independent republic, the end of slavery, and equality of rights regardless of race status. In the two final chapters, Mata argues that these political goals would receive further articulation during the War of Independence, as people of color would try to radicalize the white liberal leadership's main agenda to include political equality and immediate abolition.

The monograph is based on extensive research in Spanish imperial archives (Archivo Histórico Nacional, Archivo General de Indias), as well as on sources from the Cuban National Archives and Santiago's provincial archive (the Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santiago de Cuba). These different repositories provide Mata with sources that enable her to shift between different perceptions of the same events or processes: elite/subaltern, imperial center (Madrid)/sugar-centered political elite (Havana)/Cuban borderland (Santiago). Moreover, Mata's work shows how important the study of a Caribbean borderland can be for understanding political radicalism in the region. For too long, historians have remained fixated on sugar-producing areas as the main crucibles for social change. While this work has provided us with indispensable analytic tools and insights, Mata suggests that it is important to look beyond those areas if we are to understand local political culture.

The monograph also opens up important avenues for new research. The discursive unity of the term *raza de color* conceals the complex politics and the fractures among people of color in Santiago that survived into the 1880s and

would shape the clientelar politics of early republican Cuba. It would be important to consider what the origins and later outcomes of these fractures would be in Santiago. Secondly, Mata's study alludes to the presence of white liberal allies in Santiago who occasionally aided freedom litigants or participated in anti-slavery conspiracies. Cuban historian Olga Portuondo Zúñiga has explored the history of liberalism on the eastern part of the island, showing a vibrant field of liberal ideas that were at times contradictory or self-contradictory. Puerto Príncipe and Bayamo had been especially fertile grounds for liberal thinking, but Santiago had not been alien to it before the War of Independence (see, for instance, Manuel Lorenzo's governorship in the 1830s). Some of these liberal ideologies might have also trickled in through networks reaching out of former Latin American colonies after the 1820s and out of the Dominican Republic during the Restoration War in the 1860s. Studying the political ideals of Santiago's population of color in relation to these other political currents, both internal and external to the island, appears to be an especially important ground for future research.

Mata's work is a beautiful illustration of how the tools of social and political history can capture the dynamics of popular political movements. As such, it is highly recommended for scholars interested in slave and post-slave societies and in the roles that people of color played within them.

#### NOTE

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