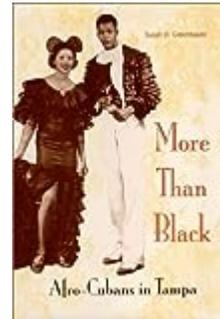


H-Net Reviews

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Susan D. Greenbaum. *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xiii + 384. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2466-0.

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Susan D. Greenbaum, a professor of anthropology at the University of South Florida, has written an extremely complex yet largely accessible work on the Afro-Cuban community in Tampa, Florida from the late 1800s to the present day. *More than Black* is the first in the New World Diaspora series recently inaugurated by the University Press of Florida. If this book is any indication, the series will fill in much-needed intellectual territory.

More than Black centers around the Marti-Maceo Society (La Sociedad la Union Marti-Maceo), a mutual aid society formed in 1900 by Afro-Cubans (primarily cigar makers) residing in and around West Tampa and Ybor City, Tampa's ethnic enclaves. Part medical insurance, part social club, Marti-Maceo's establishment followed an irreconcilable split between black and white Cubans following Cuban independence.

One of the truisms about any ethnic (or immigrant) group history is to what degree is that group's identity constructed by outsiders, as opposed to by the group itself? Being Cuban gave them some advantages not enjoyed by their black American counterparts, but Afro-Cubans were "black" by America's Jim Crow standards. Afro-Cubans were constructed as pariahs and parvenus by white Americans and also by white Cubans who learned that institutionalized racism made the distinction advantageous to their own assimilation. This adds a

layer of complexity to the telling of the Afro-Cuban story. Greenbaum argues against authors who stress the unique racial harmony of Tampa's immigrants while downplaying the racism that played out against Afro-Cubans. [1] The Southern obsession with race was the controlling factor in how the community at-large regarded Afro-Cubans.

This assumption of "blackness" on the part of Afro-Cuban immigrants has caused many to conflate race with ethnicity, and to unfairly compare the Afro-Cuban experience with that of their white Cuban or black American counterparts. Greenbaum asserts "race is a uniform you wear, and ethnicity is a team on which you play" (9). The first chapter contains trenchant criticisms of scholars who attribute "racial democracy" to western hemispheric countries in which race is professed to be irrelevant to one's social status, in contrast to the United States' black-white dichotomy. Greenbaum argues that such claims are based on sandy foundations. Creating racial fluidity can obscure as much or more than it reveals.

Greenbaum draws upon her anthropological background to place Tampa as part of a larger Caribbean-American network. Afro-Cubans were not just immigrants, but "transnationals" straddling two worlds, belonging to both but never fully at home in either. The Afro-Cuban presence in Tampa depended upon events

and trends occurring in Cuba, notably those pertaining to the country's independence movement and internal politics, including revolution. The author deftly explains Cuban history and its implications for race relations within Cuba, and for American attitudes toward Cuban refugees from Castro.

The spiritual and intellectual heart of this book is the story of the Marti-Maceo Society. Afro-Cubans nurtured this society in ways very similar to Tampa's other Latin immigrants. The club helped establish and nurture a common identity, including clear distinctions between the Afro-Cuban community and the African American community which lay nearby. Such distinctions were not permanent, however, because over time Afro-Cubans became more and more Afro-Cuban Americans and then African Americans. There were enough shared experiences with African Americans to influence that transition.

Greenbaum is at her best in explaining the sociological and cultural anthropological importance of Marti-Maceo. Since its inception, the club provided a well-spring of support and identity for Afro-Cubans. Using Marti-Maceo as a starting point, Greenbaum expands into the Afro-Cuban community at large. She interweaves oral history to explain the life of this community. Her long relationship with it gives her the insight to weave this story into its context for Florida, the South, the U.S., and Cuban history. The information is comprehensive in its scope. Greenbaum's long-term relationship with the society gave her special access to its records and memories. She explains the inner workings of the society, paying special attention to gender roles. The club has managed to survive scandal, a declining membership base, and the condemnation of its original building during urban renewal.

The decline of state-sanctioned segregation stigmatized African American and Afro-Cuban association; the civil rights movement drew them together. As the Afro-Cuban population declined, it was invidi-

ously compared with Tampa's African American community. The blackness of Afro-Cubans was used to explain their lack of "success" when compared to Italians, Cubans and Spaniards, among others. The arrival of largely middle-class and white Cuban refugees in the 1960s once again obscured the intricacies of Cuban race relations. There were also internal dynamics at work, too. The out-migration of Afro-Cubans and the exogamy of the younger generation with African Americans, with whom they identified more than with being Cuban.

In the concluding chapters, Greenbaum is a harsh critic of the urban renewal and revitalization movements of the last few decades. She raises important points about the process of Ybor City's historicization and preservation. In order to present the image of an historic Latin district attractive to tourists and investors, local interests construed "Latin" to mean white, not Afro-Cuban, once again conflating Afro-Cubans with African Americans. The politics of preservation and finding a usable past come under some well-justified scrutiny.

The last chapter, "Out of Time," may raise some concerns for historians with more traditional definitions of objectivity and detachment. Greenbaum makes no apologies for her ongoing partnership with Marti-Maceo and the Afro-Cuban community. While this relationship enabled her special insight, some may question if it is hard to separate the historian from the story as it pertains to recent Marti-Maceo history. Regardless, this is an excellent book and worthy of the historian's attention.

Notes:

[1]. Gary Mormino and Gary Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

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