Interviews with Haitian Migrant Sugar Workers in Cuba

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Abstract

The experiences of the Haitian sugar workers interviewed in Eastern Cuba gives some insight into the transformation from slave labor to wage labor. Haitian sugar workers were brought into Eastern Cuba via company and private contractors to provide cheap migrant labor. The wage system of labor mainly took the form of piece wages. The Haitian migrants had few rights in Cuba with regard to labor organization. The constant threat of hunger by the bare minimum of pay by the piece kept the migrants working both day and night. The work experiences, living conditions, social relations, and cultural activities of the Haitian sugar workers in Cuba are discussed through personal histories.

Key Words: Sugar workers; migrant labor; Cuba; Haiti; sugar

1. Introduction

Immigrant labor has been used in agriculture and related industries since the discovery of the New World. The first immigrant labor force was slave labor from Africa. By the close of the nineteenth century, development of industrial production to process sugar cane separated agriculture into labor-intensive large-scale field labor and large-scale industrial labor. The development of technology in sugar production brought about a transformation from slave labor to wage labor. The system of wage labor enabled capitalist planters to invest their capital in land, technology, and materials.

The workers who came to work the Cuban sugar fields from the neighboring islands played a significant role in the establishment of wage labor. They could not make a living in their home countries and were recruited with promises of high wages in Cuba. They were imported and exported to meet the labor demand of the sugar producers. This was facilitated by the U.S. policy, backed up with the military, and the governments of both the importing and exporting countries. Haiti became a major source of sugar cane workers in U.S. occupied Cuba after the U.S. occupation of Haiti in 1915. Many of the immigrant workers were undocumented, therefore illegal. This status denied all rights to these workers, and allowed for their deportation for the slightest offense, as well as during economic downturns.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to identify some of the effects of the transformation to wage labor on sugar cane workers who came to Cuba from Haiti in the early twentieth century, and (2) to discover what forms of resistance they may have used in response to their conditions.

This article is organized around the historical and economic development of the imperialist relationship between the United States, Cuba, and Haiti and a field study which involved interviews with Haitian sugar workers in Guantanamo City, Cuba. The first part discusses the political and economic relationships between the United States, Cuba, and Haiti from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It includes the occupation of Cuba by American forces after the Cuban revolution in 1898 and the U.S. military occupation of Haiti in 1915. These three countries became intertwined through the economic domination of U.S. finance capital in Cuba and the subsequent use of Haitian workers in the Cuban sugar fields. The second section focuses on interviews conducted in the homes of former Haitian sugar workers in Guantanamo City, Cuba in August, 2005. The discussion of the interviews is organized around general topics such as working conditions. Throughout the interview section, historical information is presented as supporting evidence when it could be found. This organization reflects the interdisciplinary methodology used in the research, combining the disciplines of anthropology, history, and economics.

2. Historical Economic Background

2.1 U.S. Imperialism and Cuba

United States investments in agribusiness were the largest in the world in the years after the Cuban-Spanish-American war. In 1924 U.S. investment in Cuba was 63% of the total U.S. international agricultural investments. The largest eight sugar companies had an average of $45 million invested in Cuba (Ayala, 1999, p. 77). This investment started when Cuban planters were suffering from a lack of capital as well as the destruction of the cane fields during the war of independence from 1895 to 1898. The Cuban planter class had few financial reserves to compete with a modernizing world market. They came out of the war in debt, impoverished, and in crisis (Pérez, 1995, p. 137). Capital from the U.S. moved in and acquired many of the largest estates on the island. The U.S. occupation further weakened the Cuban planter class by preventing them from making political and economic decisions based on their own interests and priorities. The U.S. military occupation forces had taken control of the collection of taxes and determined the distribution of public money (Ayala, 1999, p. 78).

U.S. finance capital concentrated the process of growing as well as milling the sugar on one estate. The process of driving out the small operators who did not have the capital to buy the new machinery occurred in two stages. The first stage was financially squeezing the small farmers. The second stage was purchasing the sugar that was produced by the small farmers (*colonos*) and milling it on modern estates. The small farmers might have been able to stay in business when prices were high and sugar had a market, but when the market dried up so did the ability of the small planters to stay in business. In the end the banks gained control through the financing of the industry. Then they sold the products on the domestic and foreign markets at the best prices they could find. The condition of peasants in postwar Cuba was disastrous. Peasants were forced into insurgent camps and re-concentration camps. They lost their homes, livestock, and tools. The effects of the long period of war and the occupation had reduced the number of farms to 60,017 (Pérez, p. 194).

The U.S. investment in land further served to force out the small subsistence farmer. With the U.S. in a position of governance, capital flowed freely into the island. The great agribusinesses formed monopolies in the U.S., with millions to invest in Cuban land. The U.S. corporations bought the estates of the ruined Creole planter class. That included almost all of the sugar and tobacco production as well as banana and pineapple plantations (Pérez, p. 197).

Between 1910 and 1912, Military Order No. 155 prohibited the entry of non-white immigrants into Cuba. The United Fruit Company requested permission to import 1,400 Haitians for work on their plantations (Hoernel, 1976, p. 234). The economic condition of Haiti under the occupation of the United States, starting in 1915, was a major factor for many Haitians who went to Cuba to work in the sugar cane fields. The Americans developed a regional division of labor (Plant, 1987, p. 50), regulating labor supplies in the cane fields in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. This benefited larger plantations where the labor needs fluctuated with the market. Workers were moved from Haiti to Cuba in a systematic way. After all restrictions on the importation of contract laborers were removed at the beginning of World War I Haitians and Jamaicans migrated to Cuba in large numbers (Hoernel, p. 234). The figures for total Haitian emigration to Cuba between 1913 and 1929 vary greatly, from 146,200 to 600,000, depending on the source. Figures depend in part on whether they are Cuban or Haitian, legal only, or legal and estimated illegal emigration. Lundahl (1982, p. 30) suggested that a total migration of 450,000 from 1903-1931 may be more supportable. Chomsky commented on the role of the U.S. in the Haitian migration into Cuba, "Thus when the United States occupied Haiti in 1915, it encouraged a massive exodus of workers to the Cuban sugar industry (p. 432).

2.2 U.S. Occupation of Haiti

The Haitian Republic had been built on the democratic principles of the French Revolution, and had been a democratic and independent state for over 110 years. Schmidt accused the United States of having "illegally forced through its own authoritarian, antidemocratic system" (p. 10). The United States compelled the creation of a new Haitian Constitution in order to permit foreign (U.S.) ownership of Haitian property, disbanded the legislature and promoted their own candidates, as well as disbanding the courts, and legalized all acts of the U.S. military occupation. The Haitian-American Treaty of 1915 was a unilateral document used to justify the continued occupation of Haiti (Schmidt, p. 11).

By the turn of the twentieth century, virtually all cultivation of coffee, Haiti's major export, was produced by small peasant farms of 5 hectares or less. This is in contrast to most of the Caribbean and Latin America where large-scale commercial farming was the norm (Plant, 1987, p. 48).

The investment of U.S. finance capital in Haiti began prior to the occupation of Haiti by the United States. Big banks from the U.S. had invested millions. In 1911 the Haitian railroad concession was taken over by Wall Street investment capital, including W. R. Grace and Company, National City Bank, and Speyer and Company. City Bank was well represented on the list of stockholders on the National Railroad. They included Vice President Samuel McRoberts and president of City Bank Frank A. Vanderlip. Representatives of W. R. Grace and Speyer companies were also listed as stockholders. National City Bank was also represented by one of its vice presidents, Roger L. Farnham, who was also president of the national railroad of Haiti (Plummer, p. 243). Relationships like these directly involved American financial corporations in the internal affairs of Haiti.

The American occupation of Haiti resulted in the removal of Haitian peasants from their land. It has been estimated that about 50,000 peasants were removed from their land in northern Haiti during this period (Lundahl, 1982, p. 27). Some 33 different pieces of land reform legislation were initiated by the occupiers between 1915 and 1930. According to Plant (1987) the new Constitution of Haiti, which was passed "over the heads of a powerless Haitian Congress" provided "the right to ownership of agrarian property is granted to foreigners resident in Haiti". The previous Haitian Constitution had decreed "No white person of any nation shall set foot in this country as master or proprietor, nor hereafter acquires any property" (p. 50).

During the U.S. occupation, the High Commissioner stated that Haiti was overpopulated in a 1925 report. Four years later Arthur Millspaugh, the Financial Advisor-General Receiver, also declared that the country was overpopulated (Lundahl, 1982, p. 26). This argument of overpopulation was accompanied by an influx of U.S. companies looking to recruit cane workers for their Cuban operations. Plant (1987) reported that agents from the United Fruit Company and General Sugar came to Haiti in the mid-1920s to try to convince Haitians to migrate to Cuba for seasonal work at one dollar a day.

A different argument against overpopulation was presented by the Union Nationaliste who denounced the "brutal expulsion from their lands" of thousands of peasants in the north (Plant, 1987, p. 51). Emily Balch (1927) reported that the Haitians felt that the "nub of the whole American policy towards Haiti was the desire to open up Haitian land for foreign land speculation, and see in this its chief purpose and menace" (as cited in Plant, p. 51). Intrusive, extra-legal U.S. force, the removal of Haitians from their land, and the recruitment of Haitian peasants by foreign corporations all were perceived by the Haitians as a well-orchestrated occupation of Haiti for the benefit of U.S. interests. While there was some migration of Haitian sugar workers to Cuba prior to the 1915 occupation, migration increased dramatically due to U.S. policies after the occupation. According to Chomsky (2000) there were from two to five thousand Haitians leaving the port of Aux Cayes every month (p. 437). The economic condition of Haiti under the occupation of the United States, beginning in 1915, was a major factor for many Haitians who went to Cuba to work in the sugar cane fields. The Americans developed a regional division of labor (Plant, 1987, p. 50), regulating labor supplies in the cane fields in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. This benefited larger plantations where the labor needs fluctuated with the market. Workers were moved from Haiti to Cuba in a systematic way.

2.3 Haitian Sugar Cane Workers in Cuba

2.3.1 Working conditions

In the height of the sugar boom in the early 1920's the cane workers worked 250 days or more a year. By 1925 the cane cutters worked an average of 145.1 days, and by 1933, during the Great Depression, they worked an average of 66.6 days (Carr, 1996).

They lacked the non-wage benefits of the mill workers, who received such benefits as housing, running water, electric lights, and medical services. Some mills even had schools, stores, banks, clubs, and movies. In contrast, the living conditions of the field workers were confined to poor housing and poor sanitation (Minneman, 1942, p. 28). Ayala also documented the wages of both mill workers and field workers in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the field workers making from $0.92 per day in Pinar del Rio to $1.07 in Oriente province in 1913, and the mill workers averaging between $1.15 to $1.27 a day (1999, p. 173). By 1928 the wages for field workers in eastern Cuba were the least paid in the country, with workers in Oriente province averaging $0.65 to $0.70 a day (Ayala, 1999, p. 174). By 1932 rural wages were at the lowest levels. "The U.S. Department of Labor noted that 'wages paid in 1932 are reported to have been the lowest since the days of slavery" (Carr, 1996, p. 151).

The ideological justification for the brutal treatment of the Haitian workers was racism. McCleod stated "From the moment the first Antillanos stepped ashore, they encountered the racism of the white Cubans" (1998, p. 599). Haitians were more exploitable, because of their differences of Black independence, use of their own Creole language, and their close ties with African traditions and spiritual beliefs through Voodoo. These cultural differences were used to foster competition and divisions between the immigrants and the Cuban workers, especially Afro-Cuban workers, and served to lower the wages of the Cuban workers. The white petit-bourgeois intellectuals spread the fear of a Black uprising, citing achievements of the Haitians like the Haitian Revolution and the guerrilla war against U.S. occupation. They also raised a fear of epidemics of disease like small pox, measles, and typhoid that could be brought by the foreigners.

The prices of sugar began to drop in the mid-1920s, ending the period of prosperity and expansion. In 1926 the Cuban government fixed the amount of sugar produced to 4.5 million tons, a ten percent reduction from the 1925 harvest. The *zafra* (cane harvest season) was shortened from 136 days to 87 days. Other laws were passed to address the problem of falling prices, including a moratorium on new planting and a delay of the 1927 *zafra* for one month (Pérez, 1995, p. 251). With the onset of the depression the U.S. sugar companies no longer had use for the immigrant workers. The Cuban government banned the further immigration of Jamaican and Haitian workers in 1931, and a month later issued a decree for the nationalization of the workforce (Carr, 1998, p. 105). Conditions for the cane workers had deteriorated to the point that they were facing starvation and famine. Carr reported that 500 British West Indians appealed to the British Embassy asking for assistance in leaving Cuba. The Cuban government sought to coerce foreign governments into financing the return of their citizens.

The U.S. Navy repatriated 700 Puerto Ricans and a large number of Virgin Islanders. Jamaica financed the return of 40,000 citizens between 1930 and 1933 (Carr, 1998, p. 104). McLeod (1998, p. 599) described the situation faced by the Haitian cane workers after the collapse of sugar prices and shortening of the *zafra*. In early 1937 the Cuban government used the army to round up 50,000 Haitian and Jamaican workers. These workers were detained in two concentration camps, located in Santiago and Antilla in Oriente province, to await deportation (NY Times, February 2, 1937). McLeod (1998) reported that in March of 1937 Cuban soldiers conducted a raid on the sugar plantation Ermita in eastern Cuba and arrested Haitian cane workers who had been in Cuba for years. The soldiers transported them to a concentration camp in Santiago for repatriation to Haiti. These deportations represented another of the hardships faced by the Haitian workers. Other workers from the West Indies had to endure the racism and economic exploitation as the Haitians did, but it was the Haitians who were singled out for mass deportation. About 38,000 Haitians were forcibly deported from 1933-1939 while thousands of British West Indian immigrants were allowed to remain (McLeod, 1998, p. 599).

2.3.2 Cuban labor movement and the role of the Haitian cane workers.

It is very difficult to find descriptions of Haitian participation in labor organizations or in the activities of the cane fields. The probable existence of these activities was addressed by Carr (1998):

> The political and organizational dimensions of Caribbean immigration have been little studied, in part because writers on this period have assumed that Caribbean *braceros* were not active in the labor struggle given that they set themselves apart from, and were marginalized by, their politically active Cuban-born fellow workers. (p. 88)

Lundahl (1982) also discussed the lack of information on this topic. "The migration of Haitian cane cutters to Cuba is a theme which has been subject to little systematic research (1982, p. 23). In discussing the migration of workers within the Caribbean, Plummer stated "this demographic movement needs more study. Ignorance of these movements underscores the persistent invisibility of the early twentieth century as a focus for Caribbean historical research" (Plummer, 1988, p. 3)

Given the conditions of the Haitian workers in Cuba, it is possible that they had their own organizational leadership and methods of defending themselves against the brutality described above. Furthermore, they had over a hundred years of independence and freedom from slavery. Their religious beliefs provided a strong impetus to organization. It is possible that the lack of information on the participation of the Haitian cane workers in the Cuban labor movement and the Communist Party of Cuba (*Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC*) reflects a shortage of research rather than a shortage of activity. Carr (1998, p. 88) attributed the lack of information on the political and organizational role of the immigrants to fallacious reasoning. The reasoning goes like this:

> Immigrants were – the argument goes – reluctant to organize and thereby risk further ostracization and repression. In addition, the *braceros* have also been stereotyped as possessing a culturally derived disposition to differentiate themselves from the local workforce. Finally, it is alleged that the high labor turnover among immigrant workers meant that they had little time to forge the bonds of solidarity that would have linked them more closely with Cuban-born laborers. (1998, p. 89)

Santana (Pérez, 1999, p. 130), in discussing the role of the Haitian *braceros* in the Dominican Republic, listed three effects of immigrant labor on the labor movement; (1) lowering the income level of the working class due to lower wages, (2) inhibits unionization, and (3) slows the development of working class consciousness. Santana's argument, like the type of reasoning described by Carr, dismisses any thought of a positive role of immigrant workers in the trade union movement and relegates them to being a hindrance to the trade union movement. The end result of these arguments leads one to conclude that there is no reason to explore the role of immigrant labor in the national trade union movement because, at best, it is nonexistent, and at worst, an obstacle to the national working class. The consequences of following either position closes inquiry into an important segment of the labor force and any historical involvement of immigrant workers in the struggles of all workers towards national unity as well as social and labor reforms. It is for these reasons that this study was conducted. As small as it was, it did reveal avenues to pursue to uncover activities in these areas.

3. Field Research

In the summer of 2005 I travelled to Santiago de Cuba to conduct interviews for my Masters' thesis. Through the assistance of my advisor at Wayne State University, I was introduced to two professors from Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba. They are involved in Haitian-Cuban studies. They made arrangements for the interviews and selected the participants. The interviews were conducted in Guantanamo City, Cuba. I was accompanied by the two Cuban professors and an interpreter. I had some introductory questions that provided the framework for the interviews I thought were appropriate. The role of the professors and the interpreter was to help facilitate my interviews in Spanish. The interviews were held at the homes of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was tape recorded. I had some discussion with the accompanying professors on what I hope to find out about participation in organized labor. I wanted to interview people who had spent time working in the cane fields or whose parents had migrated to Cuba to work in the fields. Three of the participants are from Haiti and three are one generation removed from Haiti.

Pierre Henry and Nadia are married. They were both born in Cuba after their parents came from Haiti in the early 1920s. They are members of the Communist Party of Cuba. Before the interview started, Nadia and Pierre Henry asked the Party representative from their block to come to the house and talk to us. After a brief discussion of why we were there, he assured Nadia and Pierre Henry that everything seemed to be in order. They are retired sugar workers in their middle to late 70s. They did not go to school, but worked in the fields with their parents. Their children and grandchildren are well educated. They continued and passed along Haitian traditions and language to their children.

Ricardo's parents came to Cuba with his sister in 1918 by way of Santiago de Cuba and settled in Guantanamo. He was born in Cuba around 1938. He has many other brothers and sisters. They moved to San Rafael and lived in barracks there, where he attended school. When he was a child he worked in the company store for one peso a day. Ricardo went to work in the fields in 1953. He has a comfortable home that he and his wife share with his mother-in-law.

Carlos's grandparents came to Cuba in 1912. They had been educated in France. They were sent to Cuba by their families because they had broken a family tradition by marrying against the family will. They were given their share of an inheritance and they left for Cuba. Carlos was the only person interviewed who had not worked in the fields. His interview was important because of his knowledge of Haitian culture. He also related a personal story about Voodoo. Carlos's father worked at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo and in Panama. After the Cuban Revolution, Carlos worked on road construction. Carlos now has a master's degree. He lived on Ram Street. His house was cinderblock, with a dirt floor and a tin roof. Renaud came to Cuba in 1957 to help his brother, who had become sick. He had been a farmer in Haiti. He had intended to go back to there with his brother. He worked in the cane fields in Camaguey. He was retired from the cane fields and he now spends his time making straw hats to sell. He also lives in a cinderblock home, with a kitchen, bedroom and a sitting area.

Patrick was interviewed at Ricardo's house. Patrick's parents came from Haiti by way of contractors in 1921. They worked in cane fields in Guantanamo. Patrick was born on factory land in Cuba. He worked in the fields as a young man. He later became educated in the history of Haitians in Cuba and worked as an economist. Maxime went by ship from Haiti to Cuba in 1924 after being recruited by contractors. He worked in many places like Dos Rios, Manzinillo, Vertientes and Jarono. He was 94 at the time of the interview and had worked in the fields until he was 80. He was Renaud's friend and neighbor and was helping him make hats. Maxime was interviewed in Renaud's house.

4. The Interviews

The information from the interviews is organized according to the different aspects of life that were influenced by the transformation from slave labor to wage labor. This includes how they came to Cuba, working conditions, living conditions, trade unions, culture, and relationships between Haitians and Cubans. An effort has been made, where possible, to substantiate the information obtained in the interviews by the use of citations from the literature and historical records.

4.1 Coming to Cuba

Patrick said that his parents worked in Guantanamo and had to reimburse the contractor when they made money. Renaud told a similar story, "Some people paid to come to Cuba and others paid after they arrived and earned some money. It was done illegally. A contractor would say to meet at a certain place and time and they would pick them up in a vessel".

Pierre Henry's parents worked as migrant laborers in the fields of Cuba because life was very hard in Haiti. Patrick referred to the overpopulation in Haiti when his parents migrated to Cuba in 1921. Because of the population "agriculture was limited due to a lack of land for sowing". He said that the pay rate in Haiti was 30 to 35 cents a day, but in Cuba the workers could make $1.00 to $1.50 per day. This statement helps explain why Haitians thought they could save money in Cuba and return home to Haiti, where the money would be worth much more. Pierre Henry' concluded with "So Haitians understandably preferred to come to Cuba to work". Renaud's friend said essentially the same thing, "If we could save 200 pesos, we could go back to Haiti. That was a fortune in Haiti. It was good business for us Haitians. Because our money was doubled when we went back to Haiti. That's why there were so many Haitians in Cuba."

In the 1920s agents from the United Fruit Company and the General Sugar Company moved more than 20,000 Haitian cane cutters to Cuba (Hoernel, 1976, p. 234). Four of the participants interviewed described coming to Cuba for work during this period they or their parents worked the cane fields in Guantanamo and had to reimburse the contractors when they made money. Patrick said that some people came by themselves and others came with groups.

Carlos discussed the process of recruiting cane workers from Haiti. Some Haitians worked as mediators for contractors to bring other Haitians to Cuba prior to 1959. He knew of one contractor who worked for the Haitian Senate. There he had politicians that helped expedite the process. There is little doubt that Haitians in power collaborated with the American occupiers and sugar cartels. Lundahl (1982) made the point that most early migration was illegal. Graft and trickery in the issuing of passports and visas were common and attempts to control this were ineffective.

4.2 Working Conditions

Most people worked on a piecework rate. Cane cutters were paid by the ton for the cane they cut. Nadia recalled the workers demanding to be paid $.45 a ton for cane. Ricardo worked for three pesos for eight hours of sowing, but said that cane cutters got $1.73 per ton of sugar cane. When asked about how they weighed the cane he said: "There used to be special scales. Some were fine, but others were tricky, to cheat us with the weight and the prices. In those times they used a method called a bundle of sugar cane. A bundle was worth $0.29. They weighed all your bundles and paid you accordingly". Five out of the six participants said they worked in the fields. Three of them worked with their parents as children in the 1930s. Maxime worked in the fields in the 1930s as an adult. Two of them started working in the fields as adults in the 1950s. They discussed many aspects of life in the fields: length of the working day, types of jobs, child labor, dinner breaks.

Everyone agreed that they worked long hours, generally from sunup to sundown. Patrick said "at harvest time I would get up at 3 AM and go to the fields to start working and collecting sugar cane. Sometimes we would work till midnight. Sugar cane should only be cut at night if the moon is clear. Otherwise you can get hurt." Pierre Henry said he would rise at 6 or 7 AM and work until dark. Renaud worked from dawn to dusk, 5 AM to 7 PM. Maxime said "we worked from very early in the morning until very late in the evening".

Historically pay fluctuated but it was never more than it took to survive. Prior to 1942 field workers made $1.00 to $1.50 a day depending on the price of sugar and the amount of cane handled (Minneman, 1942). Ayala (1999, p. 173), said that field workers made $0.92 to $1.07 per day in 1913. By 1928 wages had dropped for field workers in eastern Cuba, who were paid the least in the country, averaging 65 to 70 cents a day. When the depression hit, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that in 1932 wages paid were the lowest since slavery (Carr, 1996, p. 151). The value of the sugar crop in 1920 was double that for 1919, at the peak of the sugar boom (Pérez, 1995, p. 224). It rose from $455 million in 1919 to one billion in 1920. This period is generally known as the "dance of the millions".

The difficulty was that the workers were not paid in cash that could be saved and taken back to Haiti. They were paid in tickets that could only be exchanged at the company store for food and supplies. According to Ricardo, who worked in the fields in the 1950's, the ticket system was being used until 1959. "They paid us with tickets so we could not send money to our relatives. There were tickets worth $0.25, $0.50, $1.00, and $5.00. We were forced to use them only in that store. Sometimes 4 tickets (worth 1 peso each) would buy only 2 pesos cash. The traders were never fair to us. But we had to do it; it was the only way for us to get cash." He said "that was a bad time. In those times everything belonged to the factory owners, the pharmacy, grocery store, eating houses, almost everything. We had friends at the store that let us have food and pay later".

Patrick also talked about tickets. "They paid everyone in tickets. Those tickets were to be used in the local store. Sometimes Haitians gathered several tickets worth, all in all, about 20 pesos and then went to buy food to the store. If they didn't use all the money the store owner would give them another ticket with the amount left written on it. What the store owners wanted was to make the Haitians get all their money in goods and food. They didn't like to give them cash. I remember a Haitian store owner who was very cunning and always tried to steal something from Haitians or Cubans alike."

Renaud said that the owners paid him what they wanted. Nadia's father worked in the cane fields in Guantanamo. He became a supervisor. He was paid with tickets. "The more you worked the more you made." Patrick said his parents went directly to work in the sugar cane fields after arriving from Haiti. "My father did all kinds of work; sowing, harvesting, coffee harvesting too. The more you worked the more money you made."

There were many different jobs. Some were considered better than others because the work wasn't as hard and the pay was better. It was difficult for Haitians to get the better jobs. Haitians tended not to work in the factories. There was a distinction between the factory workers and the field workers." Nadia said" that they had to work to feed themselves and their kids so they did all kinds of work." A friend of Renaud's joined the interview. He told of his experience. "I was working in Camaguey like my friend. I pulled weeds, cut sugar cane, cleaned up, everything. I did all I could. I was illiterate, you see, so I had to do that kind of work." Ricardo said "that a wagon driver was considered a good position just like the man who conducted the oxen with the plow. If someone wanted to be a driver he had to have good connections. A wagon driver earned about 7 or 8 pesos a day and he was considered rich." He also said "very few Haitians worked in the factory, mostly only Cubans." This was in 1953. Patrick talked about how some went to work as mechanics or locomotive drivers. "Mechanics, wagon and locomotive drivers were considered very good jobs, difficult to get, and paid better than cane cutting."

It was not unusual for parents to take their older children to help in the fields. Pierre Henry told of how he worked in the fields as a child. "I saw many kids helping out with their parents in the fields. I was one of them too." He saw both boys and girls. He went to work as a horse wagon driver. He was the oldest of nine kids. Only two of them worked in the fields. "The others were too young for that kind of work." Nadia said "I started working when I was 12 or 13. I'd harvest coffee. I'd also clean up the fields and helped my mother bake sweet treats that she sold to make extra money". Carlos worked jobs when he was about nine. He worked in stores like a dairy shop and a bakery. Maxime said "I never saw children working in the fields. Perhaps in other places. But I've got to tell the truth."

People had to find ways to get food while they worked in the fields. Nadia told of how "sometimes we would have a sweet potato for lunch or dinner." When asked about breaks other than lunch or dinner, Pierre Henry said "No, never. We had to do our stuff." Nadia said "It all depended on our supervisors. Some were kind enough to give us a rest. Others were not." Maxime said, "Sometimes we rested a little but most of the time we worked as much as we could, to make more money. But in Camaguey we didn't starve. We ate enough."

4.3 Living Conditions

Patrick described the living conditions of the Haitian *braceros* (day laborers). The Haitians lived in barracks. They worked for two or three months and left that area. On the other hand the owners didn't care about how the Haitians lived. Some Haitians built houses out of palm leaves and wood. Maxime mentioned a similar experience. "I was living in a house by then with my family near the town of Barranca. We built that little house on the owner's land. He gave us permission. It was a little plot of land located between two sugar cane fields. So I worked there, sowing and harvesting my own things."

Patrick said there were many barracks in the fields. "Usually people lived together. If you were married and had kids, then you had your own room. Everyone slept in hammocks." Pierre Henry also talked about his experience in the barracks. "It was the same for everyone. Now workers have houses to live in." Nadia described the barracks as follows. "There were families and single people in the barracks. Sometimes the families would have many kids. There was one big entrance to the barracks." Ricardo said, "We lived in barracks. The supervisor lived in a chalet. He was Cuban of course. The supervisors' chalets were 70 or 80 meters from the barracks."

Patrick also talked about what they ate. "We cooked for the whole group. We were six friends. Some folks cooked for themselves only because they were alone. Some others had a wife that cooked for them. We used to eat rice, beans, dumplings, corn flour cakes, cod, bacon, okra, everything. Sometimes we grew our own vegetables on plots of land. We paid 12 pesos a year to the owner of the land. We all grew our vegetables. We even had animals, pigs for instance."

There were traditional healers and medical doctors. Traditional healers practiced the methods they learned from their ancestors. Carlos described these healers. "The Haitians were famous because of their healing skills. They taught Cubans about teas and potions. They were descendants of African slaves that passed down African traditions. This was also a source of discrimination because others would say they were lazy, illiterate sorcerers." He said that "I learned to pull my own teeth without pain by using two drops of juice from a certain plant."

Pierre Henry said that it was expensive to see a medical doctor. "By those times we had to struggle to see a doctor, not like now, because now everything is much easier for us. But then, we had to do some wire pulling if we wanted to see a doctor. In order to see a doctor there was usually a smart guy among them who had friends or contacts to help us out. I remember paying $0.50 per day for cleaning, disinfecting, and new bandages when I had a nasty cut. It was expensive for us with so many mouths to feed." Both Nadia and Ricardo said that there were traditional healers and medical doctors for those who could afford them. Ricardo also mentioned midwives for those who could not go to the hospital. He also said that for those who had money they could see a doctor. If a person didn't have money he couldn't. When asked if Haitians could afford a doctor he replied: "No way! They used traditional medicine." He also said that his mother gave him purgatives made of herbs every year. Maxime explained: "We would take home made medicines. We read the magazine *Bohemia* on how to prepare different medicines."

Renaud recalled: "If we cut our finger we went to the Cuban doctor. Some Haitians were better than the Cuban doctors, yes, it is true. We had to fight for our lives – all the time fighting." While speaking of his current health he left the room and returned with probably seven or eight different kinds of pills and put them on the table. He said: "I have high blood pressure. I need to take pills. I can't live without them. You see, I had to work very hard in very bad conditions, under the rain. That's why I got sick. Now I have to take all these medicines to live. My doctor told me so. I'd die without all these pills." Patrick said: "When someone had an accident they went to the hospital and were seen by the doctor. The owner paid him for the accident. When a person needed to see a doctor they got up very early in the morning because the lines were long. There were Haitians, Cubans, Chinese, everyone." Renaud said that after the Revolution he did not have to pay. When he was sick he was hospitalized for 2 weeks in Cunagua because of the pain. He did not have to pay a thing. The people that I interviewed have experienced various kinds of health care, perhaps unknown in some countries.

Their encounters with health care over their lifetimes extended from Voodoo to socialized medicine. In Cuba it is common for natural cures to be used along with 'modern' medical procedures.

4.4 Trade Union Activity

When I asked about trade unions there were different views. One worker, who worked in the fifties, said that younger Haitians were active in strikes. I found no direct participation in union activities by the people I interviewed that would support the existence of Haitian trade union activity during the early part of the twentieth century. However, most were aware of union activity and what it was trying to accomplish. They knew the leadership of workers' organizations and what they were doing in the interests of working people. There was no hostility towards union activities expressed by anyone. It was mentioned that it was illegal for them to strike or participate in union activity.

Three people said that strikes would last about two or three days, and then people would go back to work. Maxime said that when Cubans went on strike they would invite Haitians to watch and support. He said that he did not participate because he was foreign and it was against the law. Patrick made the point that it was difficult to organize because they moved around a lot. Pierre Henry, Nadia, and Ricardo said they had had contact with the unions. Maxime said that he had witnessed trade union activity. Nadia said "there were trade unions before the Revolution. Jesús Menéndez (A Communist member of the Cuban House of Representatives and secretary of the Cuban Sugar Workers Federation) was killed because he defended our rights." When Pierre Henry was asked whether he remembered any particular strike, he responded: "Yes. Haitians and Cubans participated alike. Jesús Menéndez went to the United States to ask for the money they owed the workers. Strikes lasted about 2 or 3 days at most. Then we would keep working and asking for the things we wanted." Ricardo also mentioned Menéndez. When asked if everyone belonged to the same trade union: "Yes the same. Our leader was Ricardo Marmajón Jiménez, a white Cuban. He was friends with Blas Roca, Lázaro Peña, and Jesús Menéndez. We protested against low wages just like Cubans. But the older people didn't like our strikes. But the younger guys always protested. Modesto Forestal was a Haitian leader." When asked if he knew about the Communist Party at the time, Pierre Henry said: "No, we knew Menéndez but the Communist Party was not very popular then. We are [members] now because of our good behavior."

Blas Roca was elected Secretary General of the Cuban Communist Party in 1934. Lázaro Peña joined the Cuban Communist Party in 1930 and organized the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) in 1939. Jesus Menéndez was a Communist member of the Cuban House of Representatives and secretary of the Cuban Sugar Workers Federation. When Pierre Henry talked about Menéndez visiting the U.S., he went to protest new quota legislation that significantly decreased the amount of sugar allowed to be imported into the United States. He pointed out that Cuba had been providing about 60% of the sugar used in the United States. He said that the new tariff bill would ultimately cut the importation of Cuban sugar to 40% of what had been imported over the past five years ("Cuba sees danger in new sugar bill," 1947). He also said that "more than 60% of Cuba' working population is engaged in the production of sugar" and that the bill would cause massive unemployment and destitution for the Cuban people. Menéndez received support for his position from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) Latin American Affairs Committee ("Cuba sees danger in new sugar bill," 1947). On January 22, 1948 Jesús Menéndez was shot and killed in Manzanillo in Oriente Province in an altercation with the police ("Cuban red deputy slain," 1948).

Carlos said: Haitians did not get mixed up with the Cubans for that. They were afraid of retaliation. "They were not involved in strikes as far as I knew. All they wanted to do was make money and return to Haiti. They didn't care about strikes much." Renaud said "Haitians were not involved in strikes. All we did was work, work, work." Patrick said that Haitians did not belong to trade unions. "They didn't because they were foreigners. They didn't pay trade union fees. How could they? They worked in the fields for 2 or 3 months, then go to the coffee harvest, then back to the sugar cane harvest." When asked if they went on strike he said that only those who worked in industries or as mechanics or others. They'd go with the Cubans to the strikes. Maxime made the point: "I didn't participate in strikes. I'm a foreigner. I don't know about that. The law says we don't have that right. Yes, I did see strikes. I saw that in Barranca, in the fields. People asked for a raise and discussed it among themselves. They continued working. The Haitians didn't do that. But whenever Cubans went on strike they invited everyone to watch or support."

4.5 Culture

Pierre Henry said that "We had to feed our kids. So we did all kinds of work. We didn't have a chance to study. We wanted to go to school. We were illiterate until we were old. Now we know how to read and write." He also talked about his family. "My son graduated as an economist in Isla de Pinos (a small island in Cuba). My daughter is a chemical engineer in Santiago. Another son is an electrician. A daughter is a doctor. All of my grandkids have studied. They are lawyers, physicians, athletes." According to Carlos some Haitians were illiterate. Others were cultivated. "After the Haitian Revolution made many citizens flee most of them were slaves and were not supposed to know how read or write. After 1905 there was a new migratory wave. These Haitians knew (in most cases) how to read and write. Such is the case with his grandparents. Others were pastors, musicians, missionaries, lawyers who were highly cultivated. There were also farmers, handymen, day laborers that were completely illiterate." Patrick talked about his education. "I worked in the fields but I studied at the same time. See, when I wanted to go to school, the teachers said I was too old already. (I was very tall) So I joined my father in the field. But later on, I heard there was a teacher living in town and I went to see him in order to learn. He said okay, so I started to study. When the Revolution triumphed I had finished 8th grade (junior high school)."

Renaud's friend discussed his music. "We went to church on Saturdays and Sundays. Then I came to Cuba and after some years I created a music band called "La Razon". We played a rhythm called Vodo, and also ballroom music, meringue [Meringue originated in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and it was developed by slaves in the early nineteenth century as a blend of African dance and the French minuet], polka, and some others." Pierre Henry spoke of how he had wanted to be a musician. "By that time I wanted my Dad to take me to music school to learn to play the "tres" [a Cuban guitar-like instrument with three double strings – six strings in all]. That was when I started working in the fields. Haitians had drums, accordions, tambourines, so they played their music."

When asked if the music was for fun or religious reasons, Nadia responded: "Both things – they also killed rams and oxen that were dedicated to their saints. I don't remember anything else. The Cubans celebrated birthdays and they would invite us Haitians to the parties. We don't have any religious beliefs. Our elders believed but we don't." Renaud's friend said that "Catholics had their religious celebrations. Catholics didn't mix with Voodoo things. Catholics and others considered it too low to mix up with Voodoo rites."

Patrick described religion and recreational pastimes. Some people practiced Voodoo, which is common in Haiti. Others were Catholic. His dad took him to church every January 1. They went all the time. When he grew up he stopped going to church. "Some people say Haitians are all sorcerers but that's not true." He didn't remember seeing symbols in his house. They had *bembes* inside and outside of the barracks. "Just like today on December 4 and 17. Some Haitians don't do *bembes* because they are very expensive and a waste of time. Some do it, and they dance and shout all night. People did not have social organizations. They would watch cock fighting or play with dice or dominoes. Others went to drink and got very drunk. Every Sunday they would sit around and talk or share a drink or visit friends or dance." Maxime said they came to work, not to live. "I saw people doing Voodoo. Some people think because we are Haitians we know about Voodoo. We were very young when we came so I don't know about that. We came to work. Look we didn't come here to live, just to work. Cubans had parties and they invited us. I never participated in the cock fights or dice or anything."

4.6 Relationships between Haitians and Cubans

Haitians were discriminated against in Cuba. Carlos talked about this. "Haitians were usually paid less money. Many Haitians were even robbed of their money and deceived. Some Cubans threatened and blackmailed them. The government protected the Cubans' interests. There were usually complaints that illegal Haitian workers were getting the jobs that were destined for Cuban workers. So, the government forced the owners to make better offers to the Cubans. So many Haitians had to work for less." Renaud said "No, ever since I got here I learned how things were and how I had to behave." Pierre Henry said "Discrimination always existed here. Cubans mistreated Haitians because they were immigrants. The rural police also mistreated us. Sometimes they wanted the Haitians' money. They were abusive." Carlos said "Haitians were undoubtedly discriminated against. But everyone was not the same. Poor Cubans were discriminated against because of poverty. Haitians are generally honest folks, very friendly and obliging." Patrick said that "Haitians could not defend themselves on many occasions. Some changed their names. Some learned Spanish quickly but others did not."

Nadia also spoke about language. Some Cubans learned Creole. In the hills people understood each other well. Naida learned Spanish. She speaks French, "It's our first language, of our parents." Their kids speak French as well as their grandkids. "We think it is important our grandkids learn it." Renaud said "We only spoke French, not Spanish. Renaud's friend also discussed language. "We spoke Creole. We didn't understand Spanish. But little by little we started to learn it. We had no choice. We needed to survive somehow." Further, "We didn't speak much Spanish. But when someone came to us we made an effort to understand. We needed to make a living, you know. We usually could communicate with all types of Cubans. When we arrived there were Haitians who had been here for a couple of years and knew Spanish. I started to speak Spanish and I was even able to talk to women, say nice things to them. Even now being an old man, I have a Cuban girlfriend."

Carlos talked about Haitian communities in the mountains. "Some places were known as 'Haitians Only' But some Cubans lived there too. The Cubans would learn the Haitian culture and traditions. That is because Cubans would marry Haitians and move to these communities. During times of repatriation Haitians would try to find refuge in these places, called *conucos*. Some went for a short time. Others stayed and married, then had kids. These were independent of factory owners. I visited ten of them [communities] in the mountains some time ago. The people started to clean up the woods and build houses [communities] many years ago. Some of them are 'Monterus', 'Peña Prieta', 'Peña Blanka', and 'Aguacate'. Today about 60 to 65% of the people who live in these communities are descendents of Haitians. Here in Loma del Chivo [a neighborhood in Guantanamo City] there is not a single family without Haitian blood."

5. Discussion

5.1 Effects of the Transition to Wage Labor on Haitian Sugar Workers in Cuba

The piecework system was instituted by the owners of sugar producing plantations in Cuba. The importation of a large migrant labor force started about 1912. Haitian workers organized by company and private contractors replaced slave labor. This new form of social relations replaced slave labor with wage labor, principally in the form of piecework. This new arrangement, based on economics, affected everyone who came into contact with it. The piecework system provided only the very minimum of wages for the worker while producing a reliable workforce for capital. Most people mentioned that they worked very long hours. This system forced people to voluntarily work harder and longer in order feed themselves and their families.

People talked about how hard life was in Haiti. Their original plan was to come to Cuba to make money, and then return to Haiti. The sugar companies made this almost impossible. Wages were at a bare subsistence level. They did not earn cash, but were paid with script, in the form of tickets (their terminology). One person said that in order to get cash, they had to give up four pesos in tickets to receive two pesos in cash. Tickets were only exchangeable at the company store with artificially high prices. Moreover, many of them arrived in debt to contractors. Another financial burden was medical care. Given these constraints, accumulating enough money to return to Haiti was very difficult.

Maxime said that he only wanted to work when he first came to Cuba. He talked about how he didn't participate in any social activities outside of work at that time. Most of the participants mentioned activities that they couldn't do because they had to work during those times. The demands of working resulted in people sacrificing other activities that would have made life better. Some of the sacrifices mentioned included going to school, learning to play an instrument, or pursuing relationships. One man said that many of them did not marry young because they planned to marry when they returned to Haiti.

There were some differences in how the people I interviewed interpreted their national identity. Nadia seemed to consider herself Haitian whereas Patrick considered himself Cuban. They were both second generation Haitians, born in Cuba. Nadia consciously tried to retain aspects of her Haitian culture, as evidenced by her discussion of passing them on to her children and grandchildren. In Cuba, there are various national organizations that celebrate cultural traditions such as music, dance, poetry, and art. People are encouraged to maintain their cultural heritage and pass these traditions on.

5.2 Forms of Resistance to Working Conditions

There was no specific story or indication of Haitian organization in the sugar fields in Cuba. The people who were interviewed did talk about strikes and watching and supporting strikes but not participating in them. Most indicated that they did not participate in labor activities.

No one mentioned that they did not agree or sympathize with strikes and other labor activities. Their reasons had more to do with the fact that it was illegal for them and they had to work. They were familiar with many labor leaders and Communist Party leaders, though not necessarily supportive of the Party at that time. Modesto Forestal was said to be a Haitian leader, although this was not confirmed through other sources.

As has been mentioned, there is not a lot of research on this topic. This study did not yield any information regarding Haitian involvement in Cuban labor or political activities. Neither does it discourage the pursuit of information on this topic. There may be avenues to pursue as a result of the interviews. For example, the discussion of the Haitian communities in the mountains might be one avenue. These communities were built by Haitians who were avoiding repatriation (according to Juan). They may have some information relative to this question. The people in this study were selected by the university professors because they were Haitian and had worked in the fields. It was a small sample, all from the same community.

The information obtained through the interviews was very consistent with the literature in describing the conditions under which the Haitians worked and lived in Cuba. The participants brought a variety of viewpoints to the interviews over a lifetime of work. Some started as children and others as young adults. They worked in different periods, from the early 1920s to the 1950s. No matter what their circumstances, their stories were remarkably similar. Time and memory may have softened the difficult experiences that they faced, but the content of those experiences are supported by historians and reports of the conditions of life on the large sugar plantations. The interviews confirmed, in many ways, the historical accounts as much as the historical accounts confirmed the experiences of the sugar workers.

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