



Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall 2011, 376-381
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Ricardo Batrell. *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.

Unearthing Black Narratives of Cuban Independence

Alex Borucki

University of California—Irvine

I received with great pleasure the impeccable edition of Ricardo Batrell's autobiography as a precious addition to the canon of black writers of colonial and early postcolonial Latin America. While the presence of Africans and their descendants in the historical sources is abundant previous to the twentieth century in Latin America, texts written by these same people are extremely rare—contrary to the abundance of black literature in the antebellum United States. The majority of documents

about the black population stored in colonial Latin American archives relates to Catholicism, property, and justice: baptismal records, slave sales, manumission, purchases of property, and judicial files. While manuscripts of black writers were not considered worthy to be kept in these official repositories by colonial bureaucrats, these institutions stored notary documents involving blacks and coloreds as notaries were important in shaping the “colonial archive.” Scholars of Latin America have found scattered African and Afro-descendant voices in court cases, petitions, marriage files, and other official documents in recent years that illuminate the relationship of people of African ancestry to Iberian written culture in the New World. Yet, it is almost impossible to count on one hand the available black narratives written before 1910 in Latin America. This apparent void in black writing south of the Rio Grande underlines the significance of the work of Mark Sanders in editing and translating Batrell’s story.

Batrell’s account of the war of Cuban independence constitutes the only direct narrative written by a black soldier who joined the armies fighting the colonial regime in Latin America—another reason for praising Sanders’s work. African and Afro-descendant soldiers participated throughout the nineteenth century in the wars of independence from Uruguay to Venezuela on both the royalist and rebel sides. Just imagine the experiences and thoughts running through the mind of a young enslaved man shipped from Mozambique to Buenos Aires, who, after being emancipated and enlisted by the rebels in 1810, crossed the largest mountain range in the Americas to attack Chile and then embarked another vessel in the Pacific Ocean—this time as a free soldier—to defeat the Spanish royalists in Lima. Suffice it to say to insights into such experiences are incredibly rich. Born free in Cuba in 1880, Ricardo Batrell lived during end of this century-long process of anti-colonial wars and slave emancipation. The Ten Years’ War (1868-1878), or first war of Cuban independence, set the stage for the law that freed the newly born children of slaves in 1870, and for the final abolition of slavery on the island in 1886. First an unschooled farm boy, Ricardo Batrell joined the rebel army as a teenage soldier in the last and successful war against the Spanish regime in 1896-1898. Then, he became a self-taught man of letters and a

representative of the black political mobilization right after the foundation of the Cuban republic. First published in 1912, his autobiography looks in retrospect at the years of warfare to criticize the place of the black population within the new liberal politics. Thus, his narrative casts light on the politics, demands, and anxiety of subaltern citizens in post-colonial Latin America.

The introduction by Mark Sanders delicately intertwines historical context and literary analysis as he provides an essay on race, politics, and literature in late colonial and early-republican Cuba. From the rise and fall of both the slave trade and the sugar export industry emerges the political milieu in which Batrell participated during the wars of independence. Sanders pays special care in delineating the politics of race during the first years of the Cuban republic, which led to the foundation of the *Partido Independiente de Color* (PIC)—one of the three racially defined parties in Latin America. Increasing black mobilization towards racial equality helps explain why Batrell wrote and published his autobiography in the same year of the massacre against members of the PIC. In this context, Sanders analyzes Batrell's narrative as a jeremiad, as a text describing past events while basically serving as a metaphor to criticize the morality of contemporary politics and to propose changes for better opportunities. Thus, his narrative was an allegory connecting past, present and future. Sanders points out that “[v]ery similar to the North American jeremiad tradition, Batrell cites the ideal, decried current political conditions that fall short of the ideal, and calls on the nation to return to the original promise of Cuba Libre” (xlviii). Apart from analyzing Batrell's narrative in its own terms, Sanders situates the work within the context of other autobiographical writings produced by veterans of the Cuban wars of independence as well as writings of Africans and Afro-descendants in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americas.

After the introduction, Sanders places a note on translation and editing which is extremely useful for those embarking on the same task (albeit on much smaller scales) as well as for those trying to approach the relationship between the English version and Spanish-language original manuscript. Batrell's narrative is divided, as the original version, in three

books corresponding to the years 1896, 1897 and 1898. Each of these three parts is preceded by a useful summary of contents. The translation of Batrell's narrative is meticulously annotated to clarify events, places and figures, which greatly helps the reader. Batrell's only commentary on the process of acquiring literacy is located in the epilogue of his narrative, which includes letters and additional documents. Sanders adds an appendix describing his own archival experience in Havana looking for Batrell's original manuscripts—a priceless and lively short essay. Sanders provides additional episodes not included in the published Spanish version of Batrell's narrative. These variations between Batrell's manuscripts and the Spanish book illustrate the shaping of this first published work in 1912. Episodes illustrating the violence of war, and the negotiation close to insubordination within the rebel flank, provide realism to a narrative characterized both as a national allegory and historical document.

Sanders shows that race was central for Batrell's narrative, while this issue was only tangential in the autobiographies of white Cuban soldiers. Here Sanders identifies the main themes across Batrell's narrative: black masculinity, racial democracy, racial discrimination, black valor, and the cause of Cuba Libre. Being a teenage soldier among war veterans, Batrell remembered with anxiety his first experiences among his comrades in arms. His small frame did not prevent Batrell from outdoing fellow soldiers when it came to acts of bravery, which in turn allowed him to scale the military hierarchy. Nevertheless, racial discrimination within the armed forces is clear in Batrell's account, for black soldiers stayed longer before receiving appointments as officers, and they received poor ammunition. Batrell's obsession regarding morality and black value probably is connected with the fact that he narrates his life as a black soldier in the war of independence as an exemplary story. Batrell embodies the sentiment of a morally resolute Cuba Libre. In other words, he exemplifies what a man ought to be and how to behave. In connecting past and present, Batrell links his identity with the narrative of Cuba Libre. As black identities are rooted in displacement across the Americas, Batrell creates a Cuba Libre that he could identify as home.

While the parallel made by Sanders between the Batrell's narrative and the North American jeremiad tradition fits perfectly, one might question to which Cuban-Spanish literary tradition Batrell's work belongs. In other words, what print culture shaped Batrell's writing? Did he own books? What newspapers did he read? Did he attend theatre? Sanders shows that Batrell's papers were confiscated and/or destroyed by the police in 1912, including a second part of his autobiography. As Batrell disappeared from public life due to the political repression and racial massacre of that year, many of these questions remain unresolved. Sanders provides a fundamental starting point to address the connections between Batrell and other Afro-Cuban writers as well as his position in the Cuban "republic of letters" for further research.

The very making of this edition illustrates many talents and evinces painstaking patience. A noteworthy researcher of English and African American Studies, Sanders crosses disciplinary boundaries into Spanish and Latin American history and culture as he delves into the life and writings of Ricardo Batrell. Sanders illustrates that the concepts of Black Atlantic and African Diaspora go well beyond the confines of both the old British Empire and the English language. Additionally, I would not be surprised if this English-language edition of Batrell's narrative sparks new research on his work within Cuba as a reflection of new currents across the Americas. The result of Sanders's work is reflected by the usefulness of his book for teaching both history and literature courses. It is perfectly suited for general surveys of Latin American history and culture as well as for teaching the experience of Africans and their descendants across the Americas. Moreover, this book could be usefully adopted in courses on military history, Black Atlantic rebellions, gender and masculinity, and black writing in the Americas, among other possibilities. As a primary source, this book is ideal for analyzing the writing of history and the construction of biographical accounts as a research method. In sum, I congratulate Mark Sanders for his contribution to Latin American history and culture, as well as to the history of people of African ancestry in the Americas. We can only hope for the discovery and publication of

additional—and unique—sources like the Batrell's writings in the near future.