

**Jason McGraw**

***The Work of Recognition: Caribbean Colombia and the Postemancipation Struggle for Citizenship***

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The preponderant characterization of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Colombia as politically divisive and unduly bloody betrays a parallel process of deliberate and peaceful grass-roots activity to make citizens of once royal subjects. Indeed, the narrative of national development only occasionally admits the positive impact of the republican era's political *vaivén* on the forging of citizenship and rights assertion in Colombia. Jason McGraw's commendable *The Work of Recognition: Caribbean Colombia and the Postemancipation Struggle for Citizenship* falls squarely within this more nuanced depiction of the republican era.

McGraw demonstrates, in particular, the influence of heightened civic participation among emancipated black Colombians on national political life and constitutional construction. He posits that the end of slavery in Colombia inspired social and political liberalization that encouraged Afro-Colombians to assert control over their professional and private lives in ways that challenged the prevailing national understanding of vernacular citizenship. Aided by the literary works of a handful of Afro-Colombian public intellectuals and local government archives, McGraw richly illustrates the prominent role of race in republican-era debate and conflict and its primacy in the restructuring of public conceptions of civic participation and belonging.

The monograph unfolds first with an exploration of social and political attitudes that precipitated the emancipatory movement as a manifestation of the republican democratic ethos. McGraw's characterization of public manumissions, *fandangos*, and "liberation spectacles" as vehicles for the transmission of newfound civic ideals to black and mestizo Colombians alike is convincing, as is his discussion of the importance of the civil war of 1859-62 as a turning point in the consolidation of fraternal racial equality. Despite this victory, the book admits the uncomfortable tension between the Liberal standard of universal rights and egalitarianism and illiberal private expressions of racism in Colombia.

One of the more compelling vignettes of the book centers on the standoff between the freed *bogas*, or the Magdalena River's boatmen who were principally black and controlled the flow of goods in and out of the country, and the forces of market capitalism, that demanded greater

efficiency from the *boga* workforce. McGraw juxtaposes the *bogas'* striking against centrally imposed inspections and monitoring with the emergence of educated black public figures, such as Candelario Obeso and Luis Robles, who pressured for education reform as an extension of the very principles that inspired emancipation. In doing so, he reveals the diversity of expressions of citizenship and popular politics in the post-emancipation period. McGraw's attention to archives and literary sources deepens the reader's context for the political timeline, and his genuine admiration for Afro-Colombian figures and their allies fosters an unusual but welcome intimacy between the reader and the subject matter.

The period of Conservative political and cultural reordering that followed, known as the Regeneration, stunted the popular movement's progress towards more inclusive governance. Here McGraw rightly perceives widespread spiritual protest against the authoritarian tendencies of the new regime as an extension of earlier popular political expression. Dissatisfaction and defiance of the Nationalist/Conservative government ultimately precipitated the War of a Thousand Days, and McGraw's depiction of the civil war is among the most accessible surveys of the war's causes and consequences, particularly in the Caribbean. This final chapter also serves as a valid tribute to the efforts of a disenfranchised citizenry to create new possibilities for public recognition against a backdrop of slaughter and under the most adverse of economic and social conditions.

*The Work of Recognition* is a meaningful and long overdue addition to the body of literature on Afro-Colombians. Not since Peter Wade's seminal work *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* has a book on race and ethnicity in the country proven so revealing. In addition to identifying Afro-Colombians as central to the story of Colombia, the text will appeal to readers interested in the political instability of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the regional history of the Caribbean coast, popular culture and expression, and state formation in Latin America. *The Work of Recognition* is an essential read for scholars and students of Colombian political history and will most certainly inspire additional scholarship on the oft-unnoticed contributions of early black citizens.