Nancy Raquel Mirabal, *Suspect Freedoms: The Racial and Sexual Politics of Cubanidad in New York, 1823–1957*. New York: NYU Press, 2017. vii + 311 pp. (Paper US\$ 30.00)

Suspect Freedoms examines the social, political, and intellectual worlds created by the tens of thousands of Afro-Cuban men and women who arrived in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nancy Raquel Mirabal convincingly argues that “the Cuban nation was scripted in the diaspora” (p. 8) and explores how complex notions and constructions of race, freedom, enfranchisement, gender, and masculinity shaped this process and thinking. Her focus on understudied moments in Cuban diasporic history, specifically the years before the Ten Years’ War, the years following the Spanish-American War, and the decades prior to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, contributes in important ways to the existing historiography. One of the most significant periods she examines is the early twentieth century, which she rightly concludes “might just be one of the most distinctive and revealing in early Cuban diasporic history” (p. 20). It was in this period, she demonstrates, that Afro-Cubans confronted the “realities” of Cuban nation-building, “realities” that failed to live up to the revolutionary promises of equality and that would also shape the “black immigrant identity” constructed by Cubans who stayed in New York (p. 19).

Drawing from literary texts, political speeches, newspapers, exile and revolutionary club records, photographs, and other archival documents, Mirabal’s study benefits most significantly from her many oral histories and casual conversations with Melba Alvarado, an Afro-Cuban woman who came to be a key leader and president of El Club Cubano Interamericano in the Bronx. Mirabal reflects on processes of historical reconstruction and archival documentation and shows how through Alvarado’s memories, especially her comments on a photograph of the racially-integrated Club Julio Antonio Mella, she came to write an “unthinkable history,” to borrow from Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

It is the last two chapters of the book that reflect the author’s best and most innovative work. Here, Mirabal recovers the origins of El Club Mella, a club organized under the International Workers Order whose members were involved in labor unions and the Communist Party and opposed racism and U.S. imperialism. The club disbanded in 1940, but its legacy lived on, albeit informally, through the efforts of El Club Cubano Interamericano. This racially-inclusive club was founded by Afro-Cuban migrants in 1945, some of whom had been members of El Club Mella and had been involved in political activities in both Cuba and New York. Still, El Club Cubano insisted that it was not a political

organization. Noting that “this was a period of intense anti-communism” and that Afro-Cuban political activity was often surveilled, Mirabal concludes quite the opposite: that “the decision to not be political was in itself quite political” (p. 191).

Chapters 1–3 focus on the nineteenth century. The first one details debates surrounding the annexation of Cuba to the United States with emphasis on the way these discussions were informed by race and slavery. Mirabal examines the writings of Cuban thinkers and the black press in the United States to reveal complicated, evolving, and sometimes contradictory positions on annexation and expansionism as well as slavery and independence. Chapter 2 looks at the Cuban Anti-Slavery Society in New York and the creation of “hemispheric black masculinities.” Chapter 3 offers analysis of the writings of Afro-Cuban revolutionaries Rafael Serra, Martín Morúa Delgado, and Teófilo Domínguez; it also traces the formation of La Liga sociedad de instrucción y recreó, an organization that offered Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican men classes and other educational opportunities. Mirabal argues, however, that La Liga was more than “a place where young men of color could take classes and learn, it was also an intellectual and political training ground where they were taught the finer points of working toward social justice, equality, and labor rights.” In fact, its creation was “a radical act” (p. 112).

Suspect Freedoms is a must-read for students and scholars interested in Afro-diasporic thinking and experience. Mirabal offers a useful theoretical positioning, suggesting that perhaps the diaspora is “a place of order, albeit artificial, where exiles and immigrants can conjure the unthinkable, while always longing to be something and somewhere else” (p. 10). Lastly, historians of the Cuban diaspora will be impressed by Mirabal’s attention to labor and the leadership roles and perspectives of Cuban women, and her new readings and framings of familiar texts, figures, and events (*Apuntes biográficos*, as just one example).

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