Introduction

*Diasporic Histories and Archival Hauntings*

Bueno mi’ja, apúrate con este trabajo, con estas entrevistas, porque nos estamos poniendo viejos, unos cuantos ya se han muerto. Y la historia, bueno ¿qué puedo decir? La historia se nos vá.

Melba Alvarado¹

How can the negro be remembered when such speeches are not to be found in the National Library?

Richard T. Greener, 1882²

A colored woman, Juana Pastor was a noted poetess in the last century. Unfortunately, the present generation is unable to judge her work, as it was never printed. According to a good authority, she was the first in Cuba to write poetry.

*New York Times*, 1900³

I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future.

Avery F. Gordon⁴
In 1995, on a very hot summer day in *el club cubano del* South Bronx, I interviewed Melba Alvarado for the first time. I wanted to learn about her activism, politics, and work. I wondered how it felt to be one of the first female presidents of El Club Cubano Inter-Americano (CCI), an Afro-Cuban social club founded on September 17, 1945 and led primarily by men. At the time I had no idea that I would interview Alvarado for decades and that my ensuing relationship with her would so dramatically change my thinking and writing. But it did. Alvarado's recollections opened a needed dialogue into the complicated, difficult, and often painful discussions on memory and the politics of belonging within the Cuban diaspora in New York.

It would be years before I fully understood what Alvarado meant when she told me to hurry with this work, with these interviews, because they were getting older and some, as she put it, had already died. And our history, what can I say, “Our history leaves us.” This quote has never left me. I use it often. It both haunts and forces me to understand the power and urgency of historical work and the precariousness and ephemerality of a history that doesn't always fit traditional historical narratives. What did it mean to write a history so shaped by impending death, fragmented collective memories, and dissoluble archives that it could “leave us”?

My initial interview with Alvarado spanned two days, with the last session held at El Club del Desfile de la Hispanidad located at 174 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. It didn’t surprise me that both interviews took place in social clubs. Club life defined Alvarado. She devoted most of her time to club activity, including organizing El Festival del Mamoncillo, an important music and community festival that was held in the “salones y parques del Bohemian Hall” in Astoria every second Sunday in July. It was through these early interviews that I first learned about El Club Julio Antonio Mella. For years, El Club Julio Antonio Mella was simply an intriguing reference to a club that Alvarado’s uncle Manuel Delgado, a musician who played saxophone and clarinet, had joined when he first arrived to New York. Except for Alvarado’s words, the club had yet to feel real. It remained a historical haunting pivoted in the imagination and memories of others, what Nicole Guidotti-Hernández writes are the “historical traces that are clearly there but not allowed to be heard, seen or experienced.”
It wasn’t until I located the photo of members of El Club Julio Antonio Mella, the one that graces the cover of this book, that I finally understood why Alvarado mentioned it so often in her interviews. The photo was misfiled. I found it by chance. Had I not interviewed Alvarado for so many years, and scribbled the name El Club Julio Antonio Mella countless times followed by numerous question marks, I too would have put the photo back in the wrong file and moved on. Yet, there in the archive, surrounded by scraps of papers, endless files, and piles of books, I instantly recognized the name of the club. I looked closely at the black and white photo and heard Alvarado’s words ringing in my ears. “There was a racially mixed club called El Club Mella. The members were exiled for political reasons. Women were also members, and the club was on Fifth Avenue.”

Pieces of her collective memory fell into place as I looked closely at the different faces of the members, sitting side by side at long narrow tables dressed with white tablecloths and flowers, celebrating the inauguration of El Club Julio Antonio Mella. In this one photo, with the inscription “Recuerdos de la inauguración de la logia 4763 Julio A. Mella I.W.O. 1500 5th Ave Oct. 2, 1938 N.Y.C.,” the vague reference to a club that her father frequented, but never belonged to, was no longer a fleeting comment. There, in the faces of the members, were well known individuals, like the Puerto Rican activist and labor organizer Jésus Colón, and a founder of El Club Cubano Inter-American Pedro Millet, and others not so well known (at least to me). I wondered who these people were and why they joined El Club Mella. I tried to imagine the different conversations and debates that took place within the club, and if the women seated at the long tables were also members of El Club de Damas, a women’s club that was an integral part of El Club Mella. What I didn’t expect to see was that the club was part of the International Worker’s Order (IWO). This took my research into completely different directions, revealing historical contradictions and requiring further questioning. It also allowed for uneasy continuities and dislocated connections between and among different historical periods and moments. Until recently, and only when shown the photo and confronted with questions about the club’s relationship with the IWO, did Alvarado reluctantly mention that El Club Mella was socialist. Alvarado’s unwillingness to divulge anything having to do with the club’s politics is
symptomatic of a larger historical depoliticizing and silencing of this period; a long-standing policy of convenient contradictions.

To understand where El Club Mella fit within the historical trajectory of Cuban diasporic politics, one that rarely looks at the history of Afro-Cuban intellectual production, it was important to look at how earlier nineteenth-century independista and revolutionary clubs influenced the formation of El Club Mella. Was this club a result and outgrowth of the ideas, thoughts, and writings of New York–based nineteenth-century Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionaries Rafael Serra, Eugenio María de Hostos, Inocencia Martínez, Arturo Schomburg, Ramón Emeterio Betances, Teófilo Domínguez, and Sotero Figueroa Hernández, to name a few, or was it an altogether different club shaped by the racial, diasporic, and labor politics of early twentieth-century US diasporic communities? Or was it a combination of the two?

There were similarities. Nineteenth-century Cuban and Puerto Rican political and revolutionary clubs cultivated transnationalist and hemispheric spaces where exiles and migrants incorporated nationalist desires with labor interests into their organizational platforms. This combination, while necessary, was not always seamless. By the early twentieth century, Cuban diasporic politics shifted. The end of the Spanish-American War and the subsequent US intervention and occupation of both islands led to the dissolution of early Cuban and Puerto Rican political and revolutionary activity in the United States. Within a year almost all clubs organized around independence, including the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC), had been disbanded. Labor unions, however, grew stronger, and Cubans and Puerto Ricans who had been involved in the revolutionary movement and opted to stay in New York were now, more than ever, involved in labor unions. With the emphasis on labor organizing and unions it was no coincidence that El Club Julio Antonio Mella was a branch of the IWO, a Communist Party–affiliated insurance and mutual-benefit organization founded in 1930 and disbanded in 1954 as a result of legal action taken by the state of New York in 1951.⁹

El Club Mella, as the name suggests, was not focused solely on labor issues and the members were not simply interested in being another branch of the IWO. In naming the club after Julio Antonio Mella, the members deliberately echoed the hemispheric positions and Cuban-
centered politics of nineteenth-century clubs while at the same time reconfiguring notions of diaspora to reflect the evolution of Cuban politics in New York during the early twentieth century. Moreover, by naming the club after Mella, the members made public their support of communism, labor, and ending racial inequality and poverty. By the early 1930s, the members expanded their scope to include the economic and political problems of the hemisphere, internationalism, and the Spanish Civil War. Along with the Lincoln Brigade, members of El Club Mella went to Spain to fight in support of Republican forces.

A co-founder of the Cuban Communist Party, Julio Antonio Mella was one of President Gerardo Machado y Morales’ most vocal critics. A charismatic labor organizer and activist, Mella, who at the time was a student at the University of Havana, challenged Machado’s oppressive and authoritarian policies, including his unwavering support of growing US economic and political control. In 1925 Mella was expelled from the University of Havana for his anti-government activities. After traveling throughout Central America he settled in Mexico, where he continued his efforts to overthrow President Machado. On January 10, 1929, Mella was assassinated in Mexico City.

Cubans who left for New York during this period did so for two fundamental reasons: their political opposition to the policies and actions of President Machado; and escape from the harrowing economic conditions of the depression. The migrations included a steady stream of Afro-Cubans who arrived in New York in the late 1920s and 1930s. In 1930, close to 19,000 Cubans migrated to the United States, an increase from 14,892 who migrated in 1920. Of that number, census records and data, suggest a third were Afro-Cuban.

A racially integrated and inclusive club, El Club Julio Antonio Mella was a place “where black people,” as Alvarado explained, came together “with whites” to practice “their politics.” Although Alvarado remembered little concerning the club’s logistics and structure, she considered El Club Mella “proof that Cubans of color” were not only politically active, but authors of their own political agenda, production, and action. According to Alvarado, “at that moment there was no racism.”

The process involved in locating, remembering, and historically contextualizing El Club Julio Antonio Mella within the larger historiography is a central metaphor for this book. A rarely discussed part of Cuban
migrant, political, and labor history, it was only through Alvarado’s tenacious memories and one photographic image that such an “unthinkable history,” to quote Michel Rolph Trouillot, emerged to complicate, haunt, and eventually force a rethinking of Cuban diasporic history in New York.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Suspect Freedoms} subverts familiar and traditional notions of historical processes, narrative, source, and location. It argues that the questions of blackness, the problems of whiteness, and the implausibility of the places in between figured in all aspects of Cuban diasporic history, regardless of what has been documented. It examines the legacy of diasporic narratives on race that would lead Alvarado to associate temporary integrations with a momentary lack of racism, and why we deliberately forget that multiple communities have always moved, have always reasserted and renegotiated borders and spaces, even in times of violence and disenfranchisement. It challenges normative masculinities and problematizes their use in discourse and self. Finally, it asserts that Afro-Cuban migrants have a long and varied political and intellectual history and existence in New York, one rooted in defining and fighting for their freedom. Rarely credited for their efforts and involvement, Afro-Cuban migrants were some of the most incisive, powerful, and radical voices in the exile nationalist movement, so much so that by the mid- to late nineteenth-century, meanings of Cubanidad were inextricably tied to ending slavery, racial equality, and a promise of enfranchisement.

This does not mean, however, that notions of Cubanidad were intact and flawless. They were not. It was precisely due to their imperfection, opportunistic evolutions, and problematic promises that Cubanidad was both integral to the nineteenth-century nationalist movement and a postwar burden. So seductive were the possibilities of an inclusive Cubanidad that it haunted the diasporic Cuban community years after the war, and years into US colonialism and control. For members of El Club Cubano-InterAmericano the haunting revealed itself in the never-ending celebrations of José Martí and Antonio Maceo, in their portraits, along with those of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Simón Bolívar lining the walls of the club, and finally in the tireless, heartbreaking, and failed effort to build a public memorial of Antonio Maceo to complement or at the very least balance the historical primacy and imposition of José Martí memorials in New York.
Scripting Temporality: Dislocated Nations and Diasporic Desires

Cubans who left for the United States during the nineteenth century had little choice but to invest in a politics of spatial inquiry, reinvention, and fiction. It was precisely because the Cuba that Cuban exiles and migrants so longed for did not exist that exiles and migrants narrated and argued themselves into revolution and nation-building, and where Cuba, as nation becoming, operated in the realm of possibility and desire. It is in these moments of potential, temporality, and the becoming that most defines early Cuban diasporic politics, what Gayarti Gopinath has observed are diasporas and diasporic subjects that can “be seen as part of the nation itself,” which in turn “allows the nation to be rewritten into the diaspora.”14

For Cubans in New York City this meant scripting nation as artifact and spectacle. Cubans conceived, stitched, and first flew what would be known as the Cuban flag (Cuba Libre) on the balcony of the New York Sun in 1850, eight days before it ever flew on Cuban soil. It was in New York where the official Cuban Republic at Arms and the Partido Revolucionario Cubano were both headquartered—providing legitimacy to a provisional Cuban government and to the most powerful exile revolutionary organization. It was where Cirilo Villaverde completed the most Cuban of novels, Cecilia Valdés o la loma del ángel, where José Martí transitioned into the revolutionary architect of the Cuban War for Independence, where Afro-Cuban writer Eloisa Piñeiro migrated so she could write without restriction, and where countless newspapers, journals, poems, novels, and essays were published.15

So prodigious was the output that it is rare to find early Cuban diasporic sources, writings, and documents that were not written, published, disseminated, or otherwise produced in New York. As literary scholars have documented, New York’s prominence as the center of knowledge production attracted its fair share of Cuban writers, journalists, and poets looking to be published. In fact, as Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky have written, by the 1850s nearly four times as many daily newspapers circulated throughout the country as there had been two decades earlier, while at the same time “the costs of production had plummeted by 600 percent.”16 These factors led to a boom in the publication and dissemination of printed media, especially
among African Americans and immigrant communities in New York. Cuban exiles and migrants followed suit, publishing and disseminating hundreds of newspapers, pamphlets, journals, and speeches. The Afro-Cuban independista Martín Morúa Delgado declared exile revolutionary newspapers the “greatest wonder of all inventions throughout the ages.” There was no other tool as effective in transmitting democratic ideas to the popular masses. For Morúa, they were critical in elevating “principles of freedom” and individual consciousness.¹⁷

Written in Spanish, the revolutionary newspapers, pamphlets, and other printed media were meant to travel beyond US borders. Designed to elicit a sense of nationalist exclusivity and hemispheric belonging, they established a shared revolutionary narrative in other countries, namely Jamaica, Haiti, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, and Mexico, where revolutionaries had formed political clubs. Transporting them to Cuba, however, was not easy. Strict censorship laws limited the circulation of revolutionary newspapers in Cuba, and anyone found with one could go to jail. The editors of the pro-annexationist newspaper La Verdad publicly criticized the “island press” for not publishing what Cuba thinks and suffers, “except in such terms as the royal censors direct.”¹⁸

The extensive publication and circulation of text, the mobility of bodies, particularly black bodies, and the determination to re-script nation and experience at all times, shaped a fleeting and subjective Cuban diasporic imagining of nation that was continually open to revision. In her invaluable analysis of José Martí, Lillian Guerra writes that in the process of conducting research in the Cuban archives, “breathing in the emotions that produced the personal and public testimonies,” she realized that “Cubans seemed to talk past each other, toward a truth they imagined differently and remembered differently. This truth, by their own account was the nation.” Guerra conceived of the nation much as her archival sources indicated they had conceived it. That is, “the nation was nothing more and nothing less than the mental location of liberation in the form of political entity and community yet to be achieved.”¹⁹ Pivoted in temporality and longing, it is in those theoretical sites and crevices of a community “yet to be achieved” that this book ruminates and dwells.

If, as this study argues, the Cuban nation was scripted in the diaspora, then to what extent did the diaspora influence meanings of freedom, revolution, and nation? Throughout the book I have consciously used
the terms diaspora and diasporic as well as exile and migrant to trace the unevenness of movement and the imprecise processes involved in shaping a Cuban diasporic consciousness and community. The aim is to denote temporality and complication as well as acknowledge that communities do not act alone and are influenced by the actions and beliefs of other communities, what Earl Lewis sees as the “reminders of the diversity of black life” and what Brent Hayes Edwards calls the “differences within unity.”

In framing the diaspora as a dislocated and impermanent site, we are left with the inevitable question of diasporic imaginings as part of a larger fiction, one that, while meaningful at the time, could be discarded when no longer needed. If so, can diasporic revolutionary and nationalist thinking ever be transferred back to the island, despite the privileging of the diaspora? Or are they, by their very nature, only viable as diasporic constructs steeped in nostalgia and meaningful only within and among the diaspora? In the end, are diasporic constructs of nation and nationalisms inextricably tied to those moments, to those colonial contexts when, to quote Michelle Stephens, “the state seems furthest out of reach”?21

As a space posited and directed on possibility, returns, and the future, the Cuban exile and migrant community was always in transition, what Avtar Brah writes is the “processes of multi-locationality across geographic, cultural, and psychic boundaries.”22 For early Cuban exiles and migrants the diaspora was a site of temporary belonging, of a nationalist exclusivity that could be suspended with their eventual return to Cuba. It was also a space of multiple reinventions; a messy and conflicted site defined by what Brah calls the “politics of location as locationality in contradiction.”23 Within this narrative, Cuba was characterized as unfinished and in need of the diasporic community to evolve and complete its transformation from colony to independence. A familiar and oft-used narrative, Cuba was cast as a perpetually fragmented island that could only be reinvented and “put together” from the outside. In a speech given in 1891, José Martí illustrates the peculiarities of exile nation-building when he tells the audience filled with Cuban revolutionaries and cigar workers that it is “allí (in Cuba) where the island falls to pieces (se cae en pedazos)” while “aquí (in the United States) it rises (se levanta).”24 Perhaps the ultimate function of diaspora is a restless imagining that makes
it easy to dwell on the unfinished, the desired, and of course the poetics of belonging. If the Caribbean, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo contends, is perpetually in chaos, and seeking to be controlled by the other,\textsuperscript{25} then maybe the diaspora is the opposite; a place of order, albeit artificial, where exiles and immigrants can conjure the unthinkable, while always longing to be something and somewhere else.

De-Territorialized Historiographies: Framing the Study

Unlike other studies that focus on either the nineteenth or twentieth century, \textit{Suspect Freedoms} looks at those periods in Cuban diasporic history that tend to be under-studied: the period before the Ten Years’ War, the transitional period between both centuries, and the period before the Cuban Revolution of 1959, in an effort to provide contextual cohesiveness. The aim is to understand and privilege those moments of rupture, chaos, and historiographic silences, and their impact on shaping Cuban diasporic history. Often these periods have gone without study because the assumption is that “nothing really happened,” or there were too few Cuban migrants to justify a thorough study. Maybe. But to my way of thinking, there are always fragments of experiences, of histories that lead to those moments where something supposedly “happened.” Nothing occurs in a vacuum. There are hints, signposts, and clues that ultimately prove to be the most interesting and provocative.

At its core, \textit{Suspect Freedoms} explores how race as construct, rhetoric, theory, and imaginary affected political doctrine, revolutionary thought, community formation, and the meanings of nation and freedom within the diaspora. It argues that Afro-Cuban exiles and migrants were authors of their own experiences and published newspapers, gave speeches, and founded important exile and political revolutionary clubs. It examines what it meant for free people of color from Cuba to move during a period of slavery, empire, and colonialism, and how narratives of mobility informed ideas of revolution, independence, and visibility. At the same time, this study looks at how Cuban diasporic notions of race contested, were informed by, and at times accommodated US racial definitions, laws, policies, and practices. Cubans did not live in isolation from other groups—the hundreds of immigrants arriving daily into New York, the wealthy elite, or the long-standing African American community—and
their actions and philosophies reflected the politics of the period, often challenging the ideas they arrived with from Cuba.

In writing such a history certain questions are invariably posed: How did African American thinking and writing on race, especially with regard to slavery, emancipation, and enfranchisement, influence how Cubans in the diaspora thought about their own freedoms? Did the growing interest in hemispheric thinking—one intent on connecting African peoples and reconfiguring independence and freedom through territoriality to redefine blackness—change how Cubans articulated and organized around race, independence, and location? How did the discourse on shared masculinities and the subsequent erasure of female bodies from such a narrative influence the way power, geography, and the exile movement were chronicled and remembered?

The book steadfastly questions conceptions of masculinity and problematizes their uses in the patriarchal distillations of power. Nineteenth-century revolutionary clubs did not offer women formal membership. Instead, they were expected to form auxiliary clubs, where their power was controlled and limited. Organized as spaces where the wives of prominent members and revolutionaries served the movement, the auxiliaries supported the larger all-male clubs. Women were responsible for raising funds, cooking and serving food, disseminating materials, and working closely with their husbands to support independence.

For some, participation in the auxiliary clubs was the only way to be involved in the movement, for others it was a social outlet, and yet for others, it was a waste of time. Some, like Carolina Rodríguez and Paulina Pedroso, preferred to work independent of auxiliary clubs. Others, such as Señora Agüero y Ricardo, were involved solely in the war effort, transporting arms in a trunk and sewing bullets in the lining of her dress. While for Emilia Casanova de Villaverde and the Puerto Rican activists Inocencia Martínez and Lola Rodríguez del Tió it was through the different auxiliaries, including Las Hijas de Cuba, El Club Mercedes Varona, and El Club de las Hermanas Ruiz Rivera, that they rose to prominence within the movement. The newspaper La Discusión commented on how El Club de las Hermanas Ruiz Rivera “greatly assisted in a financial and propagandist capacity.” It also didn’t hurt that both Casanova de Villaverde and Martínez were married to powerful men active in the exile revolutionary movement.
Outside of Paulina Pedroso and La Señoras de la Liga, an auxiliary club of La Liga sociedad de instrucción y receréo, there are few sources that speak directly to Afro-Cuban women’s activism. Yet, as Carmen Montejo Arrechea and Gema Guevara have documented, the publication of Minerva, a magazine written by and for Afro-Cuban women that first appeared in 1888 in Havana, had a major impact on the Afro-Cuban exile and migrant community in New York and Florida. The magazine named several Afro-Cuban men living in the United States as “agents” responsible for distributing Minerva. With that in mind, this study employs Minerva as an important archive for documenting Afro-Cuban female intellectual production in New York and argues that despite the lack of source, Afro-Cuban women actively supported women’s rights and publicly articulated a discourse on enfranchisement and liberation.28

Unfortunately, the involvement of a wide spectrum of women did not translate into a feminist vision within the exile nationalist movement. The political platform of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano made no references to women or to women’s rights. The scripting of nation, as M. Jacquie Alexander, Hazel Carby, Carol Boyce Davies, Ginetta Can-delario, Maylei Blackwell, Michelle Mitchell, April Mayes, and Michelle Stephens have so well argued, is a masculinist act that expunges female bodies from a nationalist rhetoric embedded in patriarchal discourses on nation and power.29 If the nation and the nation-building project are inherently masculinist projects, how did women negotiate power within a movement intent on oppressing and silencing them? Emilia Casanova de Villaverde, for one, used text to script her way into the movement, redefining herself and historically intervening into future historical narratives and sources. Others, like Carolina Rodríguez, who were not married or wealthy, paid a heavy price for their commitment to revolution. Lauded for her tireless political activism and fund-raising, Rodríguez, who earned the epithet la patriota, was mistreated by the men in the movement, who did little for her when she became gravely ill and succumbed to dire poverty. After the Cuban War for Independence, Rodríguez, destitute and ill, returned to Cuba and died.30 As Rodríguez’s example reminds us, not all white Cuban women who were involved in the movement were from the elite classes or married to powerful men. There was a large female working class, black and white, that worked in the cigar factories and related industries, as well as in domestic work, as
boarding house managers, and as cooks. There is also strong evidence that nineteenth-century Cuban women were involved in labor unions and went on strike. In addition to integrating the history of Cuban exile and migrant women, this work disrupts the uses of masculinist rhetoric and gendered conceptions of power to define nation within the émigré community.

In positioning this work as part of a larger US hemispheric and transnationalist historiography, I am left with an indelible question: Where exactly does this work fit within the historical imagination of the United States? Theoretically, there is a fictive and transient character to the writing, where historical source, or more accurately my reading of source, is in a place of potentiality and the future. One can't help but acknowledge the ongoing references to possible freedoms and sovereignty, and to the fears such promises bring. Yet, to write such a history—one pivoted on a connective and speculative model that blurs geographic borders and names their artificiality—it was imperative to configure a changing US historical terrain influenced by larger hemispheric and geographical forces, analyses, and the enduring problems of the unfinished and the imprecise. Much like the nineteenth-century Cuban exile and migrant community, who used the term *destierro* to define themselves and their work, the United States was also part of *destierro*, a deterritorialization that fueled its own never-ending desire to assert and control geographic completion.

Although *Suspect Freedoms* follows a recognizable chronology, it is not wedded to a strict periodization. The dates, nonetheless, have meaning. I begin in 1823 to mark a period that witnessed both the Monroe Doctrine and the exile of Father Félix Varela y Morales—two events that influenced early Cuban diasporic politics. The Monroe Doctrine opened the hemisphere to US intervention, initiating a narrative on expansionism that shaped the relationship between the United States and Cuba for generations. The exile of Father Félix Varela cast the United States as a necessary site for organizing against Spanish colonial rule and building nation. After years of criticizing Spanish colonialism, advocating revolution, and supporting the gradual abolition of slavery, Varela was forced into exile. Singled out by José Martí as the person who taught “Cubans how to think,” Varela first moved to Philadelphia and later New York, where he founded and wrote for a series of Spanish-language newspa-
pers and pamphlets, including *El Habanero* (1824–1826) and *El Mensajero Seminal de Nueva York* (1829–1831). In 1837 he was named the Vicar General of the Catholic Diocese of New York and remained active in a number of Catholic charities and published and wrote for two more newspapers, *The Protestant Abriger* and *The Annotator*. In 1853 he died in Saint Augustine, Florida.\(^{31}\)

Varela has been credited, and rightly so, as the first to establish a Cuban exile political identity in the United States.\(^{32}\) He was also the first to connect anti-slavery and anti-colonial politics with a Cuban exile nationalist rhetoric, a project taken up by the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC) decades later. His thinking shaped generations of scholars and philosophers who grappled with the contradictions of emancipation and freedom in a period of empire and slavery. Yet, as Gema Guevara so well argues, Varela represents selective historical remembering. He was an enigmatic figure who was silenced by subsequent Cuban exiles and migrants who vehemently disagreed with his radical views on abolishing slavery and promoting freedom.\(^{33}\)

Citing the relatively few numbers of Cubans who arrived to the United States before the Civil War, scholars have focused on the period during and after the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878), when large numbers of Cubans, including Afro-Cubans, left for the United States. This makes sense. The Ten Years’ War was bloody, chaotic, and forced thousands to leave the island. It was the major impetus for the relocation of the Cuban cigar industry to the United States and for changing the nationalist discourse to one that was inextricably tied to ending slavery and enfranchisement. Yet, as this book contends, it was the pro-annexationist and pro-slavery politics of the pre–US Civil War period that most influenced how subsequent migrations responded to the annexationist, expansionist, and divisive racial politics of earlier migrations.

Early Cuban migrants were entrenched in and defined by transgeography and territoriality. Pro-annexationist Cubans reinvented spatial geographies to justify expansionism and annexation. At the same time, the Haitian Revolution, the Aponte Rebellion, and La Escalera, along with slave revolts in the British Caribbean and Southern United States, were constant reminders of the limits and consequences of slavery, realities that were not only cause for concern, but an obsession. By the same token, Cubans who left during this period would have experienced the
end of slavery in New York, the New York legislature and Wall Street’s celebratory response to the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), and the impact of the Dred Scott decision. They would have lived among “one of the largest free urban black communities in the North” and witnessed the “massive exodus of black people from Manhattan” as a result of the Draft Riots of 1863. Cubans were aware of African mutual aid societies, anti-slavery societies, and the black press, including the *Freedom’s Journal* (1827–1829), the *Weekly Advocate* (1837), the *Colored American* (1837–1841), the *North Star* (1847–1851), the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (1851–1859), and the *Weekly Anglo-African* (1859–1860), as well as the rise of an African American hemispheric discourse on race and slavery.

The first chapter of *Suspect Freedoms* explores these contradictions and investigates how hemispheric and racialized imaginings of space were translated and understood among Cuban exiles and migrants involved in translocal political activity. It argues that race, in particular whiteness, was embedded within territoriality, complicating and asserting annexation as a racialized project that allowed for the possible expansion of US slavery to Cuba.

An important yet under-studied aspect in the discourse on geography and expansionism were the diasporic practices of whiteness. The politics of whiteness, whitening, and white supremacy, what I call a *diasporic blanqueamiento*, traveled north, shaping the annexationist movements and establishing the rhetorical conditions for expanding slavery to Cuba. It also provided the necessary fodder for an alternative independista rhetoric that connected diasporic blanqueamiento with potential US economic and political interests on the island. Pro-annexationists in New York wrote essays promoting white migration to the island and warned that Cuba would soon turn into “another Haiti” if Cubans did not significantly alter the racial composition of the island, especially after emancipation. They published and promoted the writings of Cuban philosopher José Antonio Saco, who advocated for the abolition of slavery and the whitening of the island.

Concerned with the disproportionate number of Afro-Cubans, free and enslaved, Saco argued that the racial configuration of the island needed to be balanced to ensure that white Cubans remained in power. He regarded the close proximity and the large African descended populations in Haiti, Jamaica, and the Southern United States as detriments,
and supported the importation of European migrants as a solution for whitening the island. Saco, however, was against the annexation of Cuba to the United States, and in his extremely thorough treatise *Contra la anexión*, warned of the dire consequences of being annexed to the United States. His writings did not endear him to the Spanish colonial authorities, and he was exiled to Paris and London for much of his adult life. Saco also fell out of favor with pro-annexationist exiles who, on the one hand, supported his calls for whitening, but on the other disagreed with his views on abolition and total independence. 37

The heavy emphasis on blanqueamiento and annexation inspired a backlash. As concerned slaveholders expanded slavery and supported annexing the island, Cuban anti-annexationists published and disseminated anti-slavery and independista newspapers in New York, including *El Mulato*, which garnered the attention of African American anti-slavery activists and the early black press. Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany routinely protested what they saw as the “summa of Africanization fears,” and the overt, almost public declaration of slave expansionism to Cuba. They questioned William Walker’s “relegalization” of slavery in Nicaragua and connected US imperial designs to the nascent federation of slave states in Central America, Cuba, and “possibly Mexico.” 38

In 1868 Cuban insurgents rebelled. El Grito de Yara, that is, the Ten Years’ War, captivated the imagination and interest of African Americans, who followed every battle, skirmish, and development in the local New York newspapers. They supported the rebels, knew of the mambises who fought in the war, and followed the exploits of the Afro-Cuban general Antonio Maceo. African American leaders Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Scottron, Peter W. Ray, Philip A. White, and Charles E. Pindell, to name a few, considered the Ten Years’ War a catalyst for expanding and reframing African American abolitionist politics, one that included a discourse on enfranchisement and civil rights.

In 1872, these same leaders founded the Cuban Anti-Slavery Society in New York. The second chapter unravels the history of the Cuban Anti-Slavery Society and traces the creation of a transnationalist articulation of revolution, independence, shared masculinities, and freedom. Intrigued by the Ten Years’ War and the accompanying nationalist rhetoric that privileged blackness as part of the nation-building project,
African Americans called for the end of slavery and the liberation of their “brethren” during a period marked by the end of the Civil War, as well as the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments. The articulation, however, was uneasy and problematic. African American leaders touted their notions of freedom to enslaved Cubans, while struggling to reconcile their own suspect and limited freedoms in the United States. Within a few years the Cuban Anti-Slavery Society was reorganized into the American Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which expanded its scope to Brazil and Africa. Interestingly enough, by the turn of the century, many of the same men who pushed for abolition and independence now applauded the United States’ colonial policies in Cuba.

In 1878, Cuban rebel leaders reluctantly signed the Pact of Zanjón, effectively ending the insurgency and ceding power to the Spanish. A year later, in what Cubans called La Guerra Chiquita, insurgents once again rebelled and lost. Chapter 3 examines the postwar discursive evolution of race, labor, and nation in New York. Focusing on the period after the Ten Years’ War and before the United States’ intervention in the Cuban War for Independence, chapter 3 argues that the politics of nation, race, and revolution were now more complicated than ever. Several factors led to the raveling: the Cuban cigar industry in New York; the increase in the migration of Afro-Cuban men and women; growing support for labor, socialism, and anarchism; challenges to traditional separatist politics; and the rise of Afro-Cuban intellectual and revolutionary thought and writing. Combined, these factors changed the direction and meaning of the exile separatist movement.

The changes were not always welcomed. The rise of labor unions was at odds with the interest of separatist leaders who owned cigar factories. Rarely discussed within the context of early Cuban diasporic history in New York, labor played a significant role in the politics of disunity. Cuban cigar workers joined unions, challenged the separatist platform, published pro-labor newspapers, and pointed out the limits of Cuban republicanism. No longer willing to toe the nationalist line, Cuban cigar workers challenged traditional separatist thinking, prompting divisions among the exile and migrant community. Separatist leaders struggled to find ways to keep the movement intact. They expanded the separatist and nationalist agenda by incorporating race, equality, enfranchisement, and now labor into its platform. They also chose to focus solely
on independence, at the expense of other pressing issues and matters. The short-term solution worked; however, the process was riddled with problems and dissensions. The long-term effects of such decisions proved disastrous.

Unlike in the past, Afro-Cuban revolutionaries were now at the forefront of scripting new readings of blackness and enfranchisement within the diasporic nationalist agenda. Rafael Serra, Martín Morúa Delgado, and Teófilo Domínguez edited newspapers, wrote essays, and published biographies. They established Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican collectives in New York and formed organizations that catered to black Cuban and Puerto Rican men. One in particular, La Liga sociedad de instrucción y recreó, educated men of color from Cuba and Puerto Rico and was an example of post–Ten Years’ War rethinking on race. Traditionally chronicled as an apolitical space where classes were taught and young men of color were afforded an opportunity to elevate their status, chapter 3 argues that La Liga was in fact a radical site for articulating an alternative and complicated politics on blackness, masculinity, and power. In addition, Serra considered La Liga a training ground to prepare young men of color to also be part of the nation-building project in Cuba. He, like most of the leadership of La Liga, understood that Afro-Cubans held a precarious position within the nation-building project, and that there were few if any guarantees that Afro-Cubans would play a significant role in establishing the Cuban Republic. The question of visibility informs and grounds this chapter. Afro-Cuban migrants were aware of their tenuous visibility and impending erasure within that nationalist movement. This self-awareness and acknowledgment is evident in the publications of Afro-Cuban male biographies and essays following the Spanish-American War, when Afro-Cuban diasporic revolutionary thought was most at risk of being silenced.

On December 10, 1898, delegates from Spain and the United States met in Paris to “transfer” the remaining Spanish colonies to the United States. The United States’ intervention in the Cuban War for Independence was brief and lucrative, prompting the Secretary of State John Hay to remark that the Spanish-American War was “a splendid little war.” The ensuing US occupation and the tense passage of the Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution in 1901 all but cemented US control of the island. On December 21, 1898, weeks after the Treaty of Paris had
been signed, Tomás Estrada Palma, the past president of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano and the soon to be first president of Cuba, heralded the end of the Cuban exile and migrant political community. Writing in the soon to be defunct exile newspaper *Patria*, Estrada Palma declared that since “Cuba has ceased to be Spanish and is independent, the Cuban Revolutionary Party has finished the mission it undertook. From this day on the clubs, the boards of directors and the agents abroad have no reason to exist.”

For Cubans in New York, this was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, Cuba was free from Spanish colonial rule; on the other, the future of the exile and migrant community was now more uncertain than ever. Within months the Partido Revolucionario Cubano as well as a number of Cuban political and revolutionary clubs in New York, Florida, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC were dissolved. The revolutionary silence was so deafening that it prompted the Puerto Rican activist and labor organizer Bernardo Vega to observe in his memoirs that “Once the thunder of revolutionary struggle against Spain had subsided in the Antilles, the Cuban and Puerto Rican emigrant community in New York fell silent.”

The early twentieth century was a transitional period when past notions of Cubanidad gave way to the “realities” of building a republic in Cuba, one that, despite decades of intellectual and political activism, failed to fully enfranchise Afro-Cubans. Some Afro-Cuban exile and migrant male leaders, including Rafael Serra, Martín Morúa Delgado, and Juan Bonilla, returned to Cuba with mixed results. Faced with conditions and realities that differed greatly from their past envisioning of republic and nation, some attempted to make changes from the inside, working closely with Tomás Estrada Palma and serving in administrative posts and legislative positions. Others challenged the US-dominated provisional government from the outside, publishing articles and writing essays that questioned decisions and called for the end of racism and discrimination.

For Afro-Cubans who stayed in the United States, this meant reconstructing community outside of the rhetoric of potentiality. With the end of the separatist and nationalist movement, Afro-Cubans were now left with configuring a black immigrant identity that was both tied to and severed by the nascent Cuban nation-building project. It was a period
that witnessed the radicalization of Cuban migrants, the formation of socialist organizations, the racial separations of Cuban social clubs, and the formation of one of the most important and longest-standing Afro-diasporic Cuban clubs in New York, El Club Cubano Inter-Americano.

This period has not received the same attention as that of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century Cuban exiles and migrants published a great deal, leaving a vast archive of written work. The early twentieth century, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. While sources do exist, they are not always what you might expect. In researching the last chapters of *Suspect Freedoms*, I depended heavily on club records, oral histories, newspapers, testimonials, census data, and biographies to write a history that examines postwar community formations, changing politics, and diasporic reinventions. In the process I have been part of a collaborative effort to establish and expand archives. It is curious, but not unfamiliar, to be both documenting and creating archives at the same time.41

Writing the last two chapters I now understand why so many scholars have either ended their research in 1898 or begun it in 1959; revolutions and wars generate much source material and provide effective context. Yet, if willing to take theoretical and methodological risks, it is possible to see that despite the gaps in historiography and analyses, Cubans continued to migrate, produce texts, and form communities in New York. This period might just be one of the most distinctive and revealing in early Cuban diasporic history.

Chapter 4 looks at how the impending US colonialism in Cuba shaped postwar Cuban migrant political activity in New York. Employing what Ann Laura Stoler writes is the “familiar, strange, and unarticulated ways in which empire has appeared and disappeared from intimate and public spaces in United States history,” this chapter argues that it was in those “ambiguous zones of empire,”42 one translated and rearticulated within the diaspora, that led to both the formation and historical silencing of El Club Julio Antonio Mella as a pivotal site of Cuban diasporic history in New York. As such, this chapter positions the club squarely within the larger Cuban migrant historiography. The intention is to avoid categorizing the club as artifact and outlier, and instead to see it as part of a larger evolution of Afro-Cuban diasporic political and intellectual formation: one that connects nineteenth-century revo-
volutionary thought with early twentieth-century political organization. El Club Julio Antonio Mella, as noted earlier, was one of many clubs organized under the International Worker’s Order. Members were involved in labor unions, the Communist Party, and critical of the United States’ policies in Cuba. They were also committed to anti-racism, internationalism, ending fascism and, much like the anti-slavery clubs of the mid-nineteenth century, they hoped to expand their political scope and influence to the hemisphere. The members also worked closely with the New York–based El Club José Martí and the Organización Revolucionaria Cubana Anti-imperialista (ORCA) to organize Cuban and Puerto Rican migrants in Harlem, support labor unions, protest US imperialism, and send members to fight against Franco’s forces in the Spanish Civil War. El Club Mella did not last long. By 1940 the club disbanded.

It was not until after World War II that Afro-Cuban migrants once again organized a club. Convinced that “they needed a club like this one,” Afro-Cuban migrants founded El Club Cubano Inter-Americano on September 17, 1945 at the home of Julio and Francisca ‘Paquita’ Cardenal in Harlem. Intent on being as expansive as possible, while at the same time privileging Cuba and their own brand of Cubanidad, the members deliberately included the terms Cubano and Inter-Americano when naming the club. The club’s open and inclusive policy was a clear and public statement against the covert and informal discrimination and exclusion among the Cuban exile and migrant community during the 1940s. It was a painful and problematic practice that was deeply felt and resented by Afro-Cuban migrants who grew weary of the constant machinations designed to exclude. This chapter examines the diasporic workings of racial separations among Cuban migrants, and argues that it shaped early twentieth-century definitions of Cubanidad. It looks at how Afro-Cubans reconfigured blackness to suit both Cuban and United States’ racial, economic, social, and cultural conditions. At the same time, the chapter interrogates why the club’s founders prohibited members from discussing politics and religion while in the club. The club was not allowed to formally endorse or support any political movement, position, event, or politician. So adamant were the founders concerning these prohibitions that the first articles in El Club Cubano Inter-Americano’s bylaws forbade any discussions of politics and religion.
And yet, if one looks closely at the archive, the club and club members were indeed political. The early club leadership cultivated close relationships with politicians, social activists, academics, labor organizers, and were publicly aligned with labor unions, the Socialist Party, the Catholic Church, and local botanicas. Several of the founders of El Club Cubano Inter-Americano were members of El Club Julio Antonio Mella. Moreover, their decision to not be political was not a new practice. La Liga sociedad de instrucción y recreó also declared itself to not be political. Yet, they too were very political and worked closely with the independence movement and were sympathetic to labor. Even the cultural events, which were the CCI’s hallmark, could be read as political. The CCI was one of the few places where Afro-Cuban musicians performed to an Afro-Cuban audience. It was also one of the few clubs to routinely honor Afro-Cuban musicians, writers, poets, scholars, journalists, and sports figures. The public celebrations were part of a larger politics of black visibility that disrupted the racism that kept Afro-Cuban artists, athletes, and performers from being recognized by the general Cuban public.

In researching and writing a book that examines the workings of race, diaspora, politics, and nationalism during such a long historical period, I have faced many of the same challenges shared by colleagues: the tensions among racial categories, archive, and use. How does one write about race in a manner that is consistent with the archive, while at the same time remaining malleable enough to convey change, spirit, struggle, agency, pain, and power? In writing a history that seeks to move past the comparative to multiple productions, meanings, as well as constructions of race, gender, self, movement, and territoriality, there needs to be recognition that racial categories are by their very nature imprecise and incapable, yet critical to understanding historical actions, ideas, and thoughts. In short, racial hierarchies, categories, and white supremacy defined, and continue to define, and influence how people live. The archive, however, is messy and inconsistent. There are no satisfactory solutions, simply acknowledgment that racial categories and hierarchies not only existed, but had meaning, and grave consequences. To pretend otherwise is not the answer. I have done my best to write a book that engages the archive, denotes fluidity, and explores the workings of race, masculinity, and power, while at the same time providing consistency in narrative and form.
The Unfinished

In 1995, El Club Cubano Inter-Americano celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. It was a bittersweet occasion. The program for the commemorative is full of precious photos and well wishes from local businesses, politicians, labor unions, individuals, and other Cuban and Puerto Rican clubs in New York. There are poems written by Martí and for Maceo. I still remember Melba Alvarado handing me a copy of the program as I sat with her in the club, talking and reminiscing. Surrounded by boxes, endless files, and folding chairs lining the wall, I couldn’t help but notice the familiar busts of Martí and Maceo gathering dust in the corner. The program, memories, and artifacts could not belie the fact that the club had been in decline.

Seen as a relic, younger generations were no longer interested in belonging to a club favored by their parents. At the same time, older club members had retired and moved to Florida. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the club lost more than half of its membership to retirement. As the dues-paying members left, making the rent was close to impossible. In the mid-2000s, Alvarado, one of the last full-time members, packed up the club’s records and photos and put them in her basement. El Club Cubano Inter-Americano was now officially closed.

The closing of El Club Cubano Inter-Americano has ironically led to its resurgence. Jo-Ana Moreno, whose parents were members of the club, has initiated a network that consists of the “Children of El Club Cubano Inter-Americano” and has reignited La Fiesta del Mamoncillo and La Cena Martiana. Moreno has done the seemingly impossible: She has kept the club relevant for past, present, and future generations. In many ways the recent experiences and history of El Club Cubano Inter-Americano is an apt and powerful symbol for the research and writing of this book. It has been difficult to close the door on this research, to ignore the fragmented archives and documents that inform and shape this history. What I have learned—perhaps my greatest lesson—is that surviving source and documentation do not tell the whole story; really, they were never meant to. The archive offers little solace. From my experience, it has been the crevices, the unexpected historical figures, the events and moments that go without notice or study, the haunting, unthinkable, and uncanny that reveal the most, whether we like it or not.