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### Review of Ariel Mae Lambe, *No Barrier Can Contain It: Cuban Antifascism and the Spanish Civil War*

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**Lambe, Ariel Mae. *No Barrier Can Contain It: Cuban Antifascism and the Spanish Civil War*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 310 pp.**

While it is a mere coincidence that this well-researched political history of Cuban interwar politics was released when antifascism and the loosely-organized activism of Antifa are such *temas candentes* in our current times, this book contributes to the growing historiography of transnational antifascism as well as bridging interwar antifascism with that in our contemporaneous world. *No Barrier Can Contain It* is an ambitious and multifaceted book that tells the story of how Cuban antifascist activists and radicals understood themselves and what they fought against during the 1930s; how Cuban antifascists, both men and women, organized themselves to support the Republic during the Spanish Civil War; and how antifascism served as the vehicle through which Cuban radicals and activists could find inspiration and inform their actions, after being set back by the rise of strongman Fulgencio Batista and his brutal suppression of a general strike in 1935. Although frustrated in that year, Cuban antifascists' yearning for a "New Cuba" dovetailed with the connections they had forged with other international antifascists who were fighting for a "New Spain" in the Spanish Civil War, and although defeat in the Civil War was also a setback, the concept of antifascism remained viable to them. Thus, rather than accepting a history of the Cuban Left's declension after 1935, Lambe posits that the Left's antifascism was dynamic, popular, and powerful enough to force Batista—himself an avowed antifascist even when antifascists equated him with Francisco Franco—to make a progressive turn by 1939-1940.

Lambe is to be applauded for her effort to define both fascism and antifascism, especially in interwar Cuba. Agreeing with Stanley Payne that fascism "remains the vaguest of the major political terms," and recognizing that whether or not there was fascism in interwar Spain remains highly contested, Lambe argues that those in Cuba who understood themselves as antifascists firmly believed fascism existed meaningfully in Spain because Franco's Nationalists fit their definition of a fascist threat, replete with its ultra-nationalism, anti-liberalism and anti-leftist (especially anti-Marxist) energy, and the propensity to employ violence to destroy democratic practices and institutions (3).

In defining antifascism, the author is steeped in the historiographic contributions of those<sup>1</sup> who have all eschewed cutting off the study of antifascism

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Seidman, *Antifascismos, 1936-1945: La lucha contra el fascismo a ambos lados del Atlántico*, trans. Hugo García (Madrid: Alianza, 2017); Hugo García, Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tabet, and Cristina Climaco, eds., *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory, and Politics, 1922 to*

at a geographical boundary, a historical era, or a particular set of characteristics, and instead, established “antifascism as an adopted identity, a transnational movement encompassing disparate but often interconnected threads” (15). Lambe’s Cuban transnational antifascists can include not only liberals, democrats, partisans of the anarchist or socialist revolutionary left, but also anti-imperialists, feminists, Freemasons, and members of the Black and Jewish diaspora. According to Lambe’s research in Cuban, Dutch, Russian, and Spanish archives, periodical sources, and the documents of Cuban antifascist charitable aid organizations, such as the Asociación de Auxilio al Niño de Pueblo Español (AANPE) or the Asociación de Amigos de las Brigadas Internacionales (AABI), these groups self-defined themselves as transnational antifascists who were trying to exterminate fascism before fascism exterminated them.

The book is organized chronologically beginning with the rise of student and labor activism and radicalization between 1920 and 1935 when the all-too-familiar factionalism between revolutionary left organizations facilitated both the Machado and Batista regimes’ often brutally violent suppression of opposition. Running throughout the chapters, however, is the story of Teresa “Teté” Casuso, who dedicated her life to antifascism and democracy beginning as a university student organizer in the early 1930s, and her husband, Pablo de la Torriente Brau, also an intellectual and activist, who was killed in battle during the Spanish Civil War. Not only did the frustrations and suppressions in this period reveal the need for a unifying identity for those seeking the “New Cuba,” but Lambe traces the lived experiences of Cuban exiles (such as Torriente Brau) who found themselves in places like New York City, for example, among others eager to do something as they monitored developments in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

In Chapter Two, Lambe shows us that before there was a Spanish Civil War, Cuban antifascists, particularly Cubans of African descent, condemned Fascist Italy’s Invasion of and War with Ethiopia in 1935 primarily through discussions in the public sphere of the press. Although fissures within the antifascists were revealed in the myriad responses to Mussolini’s aggression, Franco’s invasion of Spain and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War offered Black Cubans the opportunity to join other Cuban antifascists of various races, skin color, and political sympathies to avenge Ethiopia by fighting for the Second Spanish Republic. In Chapter Three, Lambe notes that conflicting claims, incomplete records, and the use of pseudonyms and fake passports make the exact number of Cuban volunteers in the International Brigades and other pro-republican organizations extremely difficult to establish; however, she believes that at least 1,067 Cubans participated in the Spanish conflict, a

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*the Present* (New York: Berghahn, 2016); and Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Antifascist Handbook* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017).

remarkable number considering only approximately 3,000 Americans participated. Along with the fifth chapter, we learn that Cubans not only served in combat roles, but also that their connections with their homeland and the USA gave them special roles as translators and network builders, which made them a crucial bridge between English- and Spanish-speaking volunteers.

Sandwiched between these chapters, Chapter Four details not only AANPE's charity efforts during the Spanish Civil War, but also the meaning of aid for Spanish Republican children to Cuban antifascists. Teté Casuso devoted herself tirelessly to the organization after the death of her husband, not only because it was part of an international campaign to raise aid, but also because she believed the blood of Spanish children ran through their veins. This idea created a familial and cultural connection that was presented as non-partisan.

The final chapter and conclusion speak to the continuity of antifascism in the fight for a "New," democratic Cuba, but also the multivalent uses and meanings ascribed to it. Batista proclaimed himself an antifascist bulwark against the soft imperialism of American capitalism and in denouncing Franco, Hitler and Mussolini, but whether his move toward a liberal democratic 1940 Constitution—which he would abuse—was the product of genuine antifascist commitment or an act of political opportunism is less clear. In addition, given the divisive nature of the Spanish Civil War both in Spain and beyond, missing here is treatment of the global-rightist networks in Cuba who chose the Nationalists, most likely because Franco could differentiate himself and his movement as Catholic and conservative rather than fascist. Notwithstanding, this book is a remarkable and successful analysis of transnational antifascism, which had and still has the power to bind so many disparate groups.

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