
This nuanced study of Black freedom-making in the eastern Cuban city of Santiago offers a powerful counterpoint to the Havana-centric historiography on Cuba. Adriana Chira delivers an impressively grounded local history, rooted deeply in individual and community experience. The protagonists of this story are rural peasants, largely people of color, some enslaved, others free, and still others in a state somewhere in between. By examining peasant claims-making, *Patchwork Freedoms* decenters the grandiose manifestos that typically propel narratives of freedom-making during the Age of Revolutions. Instead, the book privileges the contributions of humble people who forged pathways to freedom, not mainly through liberal ideologies of universal freedom or inclusive citizenship, but through small and seemingly unspectacular actions grounded in local custom.

Drawing on freedom suits, testaments, manumission papers, parish records, and more, Chira traces the development of what she calls an “entitled peasantry of African descent” (p. 26). The book is organized in six substantive chapters, beginning with the origins of Santiago’s free population and ending with the liberal abolition of slavery. Early on, Chira shows how the interests of local elites in some ways converged with those of enslaved claimants for freedom. This materialized, for instance, at the turn of the nineteenth century, as wealthy refugees of the Haitian Revolution arrived in Santiago seeking to reestablish their plantation-based worlds, but local elites sought to retain traditions of smallholding. Even during the expansion of coffee plantations (1815–30), cooperation existed alongside violence as a mechanism for preserving slavery amid broader antislavery sentiment across the Caribbean. Indeed, local authorities sought to assuage concerns over insurrection by granting the petitions of some enslaved and free people of color for freedom or privileges, such as the one that sought to establish an elected cabildo in El Cobre.

Many of the petitions invoked not individual rights as outlined in legislation or bureaucratic procedure, but rather context-specific rights negotiated through community. Thus, claimants did more than invoke written laws; they often deployed language meant to “sway the heart” of the judge, as Chira cogently explains. The claims of enslaved petitioners often rested on their relationships and reputation within the community. The evolving legal strategies surrounding rape illustrate this point. Whereas initially manumission was framed as redress for the moral damage caused by the rape, the Audiencia eventually reversed this custom, forcing claimants to present sex as a morally

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positive form of labor that helped establish families and households. Enslaved women vying for manumission had to demonstrate that their affective labor met contractual obligations, as substantiated by community witnesses. This shift illustrated a broader incorporation of merit—an enslaved person’s worthiness of freedom measured by acts, service, behavior, and assessed by community members—into the legal arguments needed to secure freedom. But community ties were a double-edged sword, helping to gain freedom but also establishing debts that required payment or service after freedom. Here was a context in which social mobility hinged on the ability to control property and people, as shown by the manumission pyramid schemes Chira describes.

A gradual shift away from custom and toward positive law foreclosed certain pathways to freedom that had historically relied on the plasticity of custom, leading to the eruption of antislavery movements, which were eventually rolled into anticolonial insurrection. By framing that shift against a longer durée historical portrait of local custom-based claims-making, *Patchwork Freedoms* provides new insights on overarching questions defining Cuban history. Readers will emerge with a clearer understanding of why the anticolonial insurrection erupted specifically in eastern Cuba, precisely at a moment when colonial policies disproportionately disadvantaged smallholders, and failed to take root beyond the region until after the abolition of slavery. They will see why anticolonialism, from its very inception, was intimately intertwined with—even emerging from—movements against slavery as the shift from custom to positive law frustrated the pathways to freedom that enslaved people had historically utilized. They will gain important clues about why racial confraternity defined these struggles rhetorically, and why it failed so spectacularly in plantation-focused regions, as it made reference to deeply local customs and community relations in which property ownership and patronage loomed over race as the primary systems structuring local hierarchies.

The book is much more than a local history. It is thoroughly situated and connected to broader Caribbean and hemispheric developments and offers a novel, more complete understanding of key questions in Cuban history. For all these reasons and more, *Patchwork Freedoms* should be required reading for students of slavery not just in Cuba, or the Spanish Empire more broadly, but across the Atlantic World.

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