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If a recent ambition of early North American historians is to pay closer attention to other areas around the globe, then Ada Ferrer’s Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution is essential reading for helping to realize that goal. Not only does the author illustrate how the Haitian Revolution shaped the Spanish Caribbean, she also emphasizes themes—slavery, freedom, trade—that resonate with North American scholarship in important ways. In sum, Ferrer offers us an opportunity to scrutinize the U.S. Republic through, to extend her metaphor, the mirrors of Haiti and Cuba.

Ferrer reconsiders a central and terrible irony of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Caribbean history: as former slaves in Saint Domingue emerged victorious from their campaign against slavery and colonialism, Cuban planters pursued an aggressive escalation of the slave-based sugar economy. Scholars have long recognized the rise of sugar in Cuba as an unintended consequence of the Haitian Revolution, much like the Louisiana Purchase and the subsequent expansion of slavery into the U.S. West. But Ferrer analyzes the intricacies of how this process worked on the ground in Haiti and Cuba in the 1790s and early 1800s. Seeking to move beyond the tendency in Cuban historiography to see Haiti merely as a spectral presence, she demonstrates “the quotidian links—material and symbolic” (11) between the two islands. The result is “a story of freedom and slavery being made and unmade, simultaneously and each almost within view of the other” (13).

To show this process of making and unmaking, Freedom’s Mirror is divided into two parts, with the first focusing on the connections between Saint Domingue and Cuba during the Haitian Revolution and the second on the immediate postindependence era. Ferrer begins by detailing Cuba’s rapid transformation. Though slavery had existed in the colony since the sixteenth century, only with the advent of the Haitian Revolution did the institution become a dominant feature of Cuban society and its economy. As the author makes clear, the nature of this slavery was deeply informed by how residents understood and experienced events in the neighboring French colony. Elites attempted to eliminate specific threats, which, in their view, had sparked rebellion in Saint Domingue. Invoking a language of “contagion” (8), they tried to ban the entry of dangerous “negros franceses” (60), to keep closer tabs on the movements of free people of color,
and to track maroons. Despite these efforts, the very ships that brought enslaved Africans also carried news and people from Saint Domingue and consequently spread word among Cuban slaves about the nearby liberation movement. Nevertheless, when incidents of revolutionary activity increased among the enslaved, Cuban planters blamed outside agitators, stepped up surveillance, and continued to pursue their ambitions for a sugar economy.

These interpretations will sound familiar to early Americanists. As several studies have shown, Americans, white and black, reacted in a similar variety of ways when confronted with news from revolutionary Saint Domingue and the arrival of migrants from the island. Given that evidence from U.S. merchants and newspapers figures in other aspects of Ferrer’s work, it would have been useful had this book weighed in on these connections. That said, Ferrer draws on a broad array of Spanish-language sources—including court records, administrative correspondence, personal papers, treatises, and images—which illuminate aspects of the Cuban encounter with the Haitian Revolution that differ markedly from the U.S. case and that invite interesting avenues of comparison. The third chapter follows Cuban soldiers sent to Santo Domingo in the early 1790s to protect the colony for the Spanish Empire. On the one hand, Spanish officials worried that the rebellion on the French side of the island would spread east to Santo Domingo, and on the other, the disruption caused by insurrection presented the possibility of expanding Spanish dominion on Hispaniola. Both motivations for military action intensified as of January 1793, when Spain joined other European powers in a war against France. In Santo Domingo the war had uniquely colonial characteristics, requiring, for example, that white Cuban officers cooperate with auxiliaries of former Saint Dominguan slaves, who were fighting on behalf of the Spanish king. Not surprisingly, the partnership was vexed, as white Cubans begrudged the perks and liberties granted to black soldiers, and the experience shaped Cubans’ approach to their plantation regime in material and

ideological terms. At the same time that these soldiers shipped confiscated sugar-producing equipment and slaves from Saint Domingue to Cuba, they came away convinced of the dangers of “independence, popular mobilization, and the ascent of black military figures” (144).

Spain lost Santo Domingo to France (temporarily) under the terms of a 1795 peace treaty, and Ferrer explores what this development meant for the relationship between Cuba and Saint Domingue in the final years of the Haitian Revolution. In late 1801 Napoleon Bonaparte sent his brother-in-law, Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc, with tens of thousands of troops to Saint Domingue in an attempt to reinstate slavery in the colony. The white Cuban elite supported the French, but not without reservations, for they felt their slave regime imperiled by the alliance, especially as French forces met staunch resistance from former slaves who had come to the conclusion that in order to retain their liberty they had to fight for independence as well. In 1804 the former slaves, now Haitians, prevailed, and as Ferrer reveals, their victory signaled for Cubans two contradictory lessons at once: it indicated the ability of black men to assert their freedom in the most forceful of terms, and it suggested the capacity of Cuban slavery to benefit from the crisis, absorbing Saint Dominguan refugees with expertise in sugar production.

Taken together, these chapters reveal the relationship between slavery and freedom in a time of war—not as an intellectual exercise, but as a lived experience of palpable intensity. Importantly in Ferrer’s account, this intensity did not abate with Haitian independence. On both islands, Haiti’s early national years were as contested and fraught as the revolution. This is a crucial historiographical intervention because most works about the impact of Haiti on the Atlantic world are limited to the revolution: either the era itself or its persistence in the public imagination afterward. Ferrer shows the messiness of the postindependence moment, which “probably felt less like something entirely new than like one more chapter in a long and uncertain struggle” (199). War continued, as France tried to undercut the Haitian project, using Santo Domingo as a base from which to attack by land and by sea. Cuban planters aided French endeavors, fearful of what an independent Haiti might inspire among their slaves, and soon enough, even with sundry precautions, officials noted a surge in conspiracies and marronage. Ferrer stresses that there are no direct links between this slave unrest and Haitian emissaries, yet the example of Haiti inevitably informed Cuban discontent, providing a powerful and concrete alternative to enslavement.

The Spanish imperial crisis of 1808 opened up new dangers for Cuban elites: from the French in their midst, from Haitians across the sea, and from talk of abolition in Spain. In the end, Spain kept hold of Cuba by promising to preserve slavery and the slave trade. But this deal provided limited security, as evidenced a few years later during a rebellion led by José Antonio Aponte, a free man of color. Inspired by British attempts to
suppress the slave trade, by the coronation of Henri Christophe in Haiti, and by the arrival in Havana of black auxiliaries (albeit loyalist ones) from the Haitian Revolution, Aponte and his collaborators saw an opportunity to enact in Cuba the freedom and equality that were being realized elsewhere. Although their movement was dismantled, Ferrer locates in Aponte’s rebellion an articulation of “black power that was at once military, political, and spiritual” (310). This is most eloquently expressed in Aponte’s (now missing) book that he showed to his followers; through depictions of “Ethiopians” (309), Haitian leaders, and other impressive figures of African descent, Aponte wrote an alternate history with his images, one that turned to the distant and near past to inspire a free future for the enslaved in Cuba.

Ferrer’s book speaks to our present in meaningful ways. As early U.S. historians, Freedom’s Mirror challenges us to think more deeply about the Caribbean context of the Age of Revolution—to be more capacious in the areas we include and in the time frame we consider. Perhaps most valuably, Ferrer reminds us of both the astonishing accomplishments and the debilitating limitations that characterized the age, the legacies of which persist in Cuba, in Haiti, and in the United States today.