

BOOK REVIEWS

Adriana Chira, *Patchwork Freedoms: Law, Slavery, and Race Beyond Cuba's Plantations*

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A patchwork is made up of many bits of cloth of different colors, materials, and patterns woven together to beautiful effect. That is an accurate metaphor for the careful work that Adriana Chira has done in *Patchwork Freedoms: Law, Slavery, and Race Beyond Cuba's Plantations*. She has stitched together bits of information found in various sources and forged a cutting-edge argument about the making of law in Santiago de Cuba, where long-standing, custom-based manumission practices and widespread popular legalism crafted an entitled peasantry of African descent in the region. Chira's findings are based on a meticulous analysis of court cases, testaments, manumission papers, parish records, official correspondence, and juridical writings.

In the Introduction, Chira presents the key ideas that she will develop in the chapters that follow. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in Santiago de Cuba, Afro-descendant peasants built what Chira terms “rural worlds of freedom” (p. 1) in which a “custom-centered” (p. 4) “popular legalism” (p. 24) enabled these peasants to negotiate manumission and land access. Through mundane daily practices, these communities acquired a sense of “entitlement” (p. 12) that impaired slavery law. By the end of the nineteenth-century, “freedom as custom” (p. 9) and “popular forms of racial thinking” (p. 10) fueled revolutionary demands that went beyond liberal abolitionism.

Chira's book is of interest to a broad audience of scholars and students that goes beyond specialists in Cuban history. Chapter 1 does a wonderful job of setting the stage for this wider audience. The author presents a detailed panorama of Santiago de Cuba before the nineteenth century. She shows how, since the 1600s, local forms of slavery, local geography, and an enduring

tradition of local autonomy enabled the formation of groups of enslaved and free people of color: *cobrereros* and *vegueros*. They combined legal actions with other forms of *marronage* (extricating oneself from slavery) in order to secure their rights. In tandem with colonial prudential legal practices, their demands shaped labor and land access for centuries to come.

Chapter 2 adds another layer of complexity to Santiago's social framework: the arrival of Saint-Domingue refugees fleeing the Haitian Revolution. Some elite Saint-Domingue refugees tried to establish plantations in Cuba, facing strong opposition from smallholding *santiagueros*. Alongside attempts to expand plantation and slavery, the consequences of the Haitian Revolution were also felt through echoes of emancipation discourses that reached Eastern Cuba. When people of African descent in Santiago articulated these transatlantic emancipation discourses, they merged them with long-standing local legal traditions of custom-based manumission and land access.

However, a long-established sense of entitlement could not prevent the extensive spread of coffee plantations from the 1810s onwards. Chapter 3 explains how *santiagueros* appealed to the colonial legal framework to protect custom-based rights. In this context, family ties determined the possibility of acquiring manumission and accumulating property. The vernacular legalism that informed custom-based practices shaped legal meanings of freedom that were not the direct result of liberal discourses.

In Chapter 4, Chira shows how, by the 1830s, enslaved people had reshaped the legal meanings of freedom as merit-based entitlements. To back up this argument, she carefully analyzes practices of paying for freedom in installments (*coartación*) and demonstrates how they were related to the accumulation of property. People of African descent forged an idiom of rights entitlement in their everyday negotiations of freedom and ownership. Community relations played a central role when it came to accessing the value of enslaved people's labor, as colonial law heavily relied on witness testimony, and those witnesses came from local communities.

In parallel with the construction of an idea of freedom as a merit-based entitlement, social tension had arisen in Cuba by the second half of the nineteenth-century. In addition to detailing the rise of militarism and social tension on the island, Chapter 5 explores how race and dependency ties framed status within Santiago's Afro-descendant peasantry. Property ownership and merit-based rights determined color-status differentiation among free people of color.

The different elements of the *santiaguero's* popular legalism that Chira brings to light throughout the book are sewn together in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion. Popular legalism forged a widespread sense of entitlement that ultimately fueled the "silent revolution" (p. 224) that erupted in the 1860s. Plantation-driven tax and judicial reforms conflicted with custom-based rights. Seeing their access to manumission, land, and autonomy curtailed, people of color channeled their demands into the political mobilization that led to the Cuban Wars of Independence.

Patchwork Freedoms is a masterpiece of scholarly production and a skillful example of how to write legal history. Chira shows how people of African descent sewed together different elements of custom-based rights, legal

entitlements, and popular legalism in the making of law in Santiago de Cuba. This book challenges assumptions that law in the Global South is a variation of European and North American legal systems. It also reveals other layers of law-making that goes beyond elite circles. In this sense, Chira's book is not just about a peripheral Cuban region, it is about how law is a patchwork made by stitching together a wide array of elements, many of them as mundane as little bits of cloth.

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Sascha Auerbach, *Armed with Sword and Scales: Law, Culture, and Local Courtrooms in London, 1860–1913*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xxii, 403. \$99.99 hardcover (ISBN 978-1-108-49155-6).

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Summary justice has been seriously under-studied. This is regrettable: the law is an important interface between the state and its citizens, and those who did come in contact with the legal system tended to do so at its lower levels. Peter King, working in the period spanning roughly the mid-eighteenth century through to 1840, was something of a pioneer in examining these interactions, while Daniel Grey pursued the subject in the City of London in the late eighteenth century. Sascha Auerbach's most welcome and ambitious book extends this important study to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His subject is the "tripartite dynamic of communities, courtrooms, and police" in the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods (23), a dynamic embedded within the broader contours of the developing Victorian state. He considers the "institutional persistence" of the summary courts from their expansion and reform in the 1830s into the twentieth century, and argues that their longevity was owed to the balance achieved by "centralized, institutional cohesion" and the ability of these courts to respond to local concerns (342–43).

The local courts in question are London's magistrates' or police courts. These courts, according to Auerbach, "operated as arguably the most democratic and inclusive venues of the local state" (7). He views the increase in their business in the nineteenth century as an indicator of a fundamental shift in the relationship between the people and those by whom they were