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978-1-107-02942-2 - Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution

Ada Ferrer

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Freedom's Mirror

During the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, arguably the most radical revolution of the modern world, slaves and former slaves succeeded in ending slavery and establishing an independent state. Yet on the Spanish island of Cuba, barely fifty miles away, the events in Haiti helped usher in the antithesis of revolutionary emancipation. When Cuban planters and authorities saw the devastation of the neighboring colony, they rushed to fill the void left in the world market for sugar, to buttress the institutions of slavery and colonial rule, and to prevent “another Haiti” from happening in their territory. *Freedom's Mirror* follows the reverberations of the Haitian Revolution in Cuba, where the violent entrenchment of slavery occurred at the very moment that the Haitian Revolution provided a powerful and proximate example of slaves destroying slavery. By creatively linking two stories – the story of the Haitian Revolution and that of the rise of Cuban slave society – that are usually told separately, Ada Ferrer sheds fresh light on both of these crucial moments in Caribbean and Atlantic history.

Ada Ferrer is Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. She is the author of *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898*, which won the 2000 Berkshire Book Prize for the best first book written by a woman in any field of history.

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In memory of

Rita Blanco, 1888–1975

José Luciano Franco, 1891–1989

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The world had seen so many changes that the storyteller's "once upon a time" had been replaced by the phrases "before the Revolution" and "after the Revolution."

Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*

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Acknowledgments

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My parents, Ramón and Adelaida Ferrer, wonder why I spend so much time pursuing the lives of long-dead people in archives. Their skepticism notwithstanding, I owe to them many of the passions and habits that animate this book. My daughters Alina and Lucía take particular pleasure in reminding me that I have been working on this book for all, or almost all, their lifetimes. I thank them for their levity and inspiration; I have loved sharing this book (and life) with them. Amena Sengal, Julia Sollenberger, and Claire VanRyzin have helped make it possible to raise children and write at the same time. My husband, Gregg VanRyzin, has also shared this book with me for a very long time. The thought of sharing with him a few more books, as well as many other things new and old, is a great part of my motivation.

I dedicated my first book, *Insurgent Cuba*, to the memory of my grandmother, Rita Blanco, born in 1888, whom I met but cannot remember. In researching that book I accidentally discovered that in the late nineteenth century her hometown in Pinar del Río province was nicknamed “little Haiti.” A woman of color, who sang and spoke some French, she may have been – among many other things in her life, including mother of twelve and grandmother and great grandmother of hundreds – a product of the kinds of histories told in these pages. Once more, I dedicate this book to her elusive memory.

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On my first visit to the Cuban National Archives in Havana in the summer of 1990, historian Fe Iglesias served as my guide. As I headed for the small table just to the right as one enters the reading room, she stopped me and explained that that had been the table of the late José Luciano Franco. Out of respect for him she would not sit there. I never met Franco, who was born in 1891 and who had died just about six months before my first visit to the island. He was without question one of the most important Cuban historians of the twentieth century, having written dozens of books on every important topic in Cuban history and a few on Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain. I have never failed to learn from his work – from his choice of topics, from his sometimes too-sparse footnotes, from his insistence on putting questions of slavery and race at the heart of political history. For a long time, I avoided sitting at his old table out of regard for him and for Fe, who is no longer able to do research. More recently, with the archives sometimes crowded and with few outlets for computer plugs, I have once or twice had to sit at Franco's table. I do so always with a little trepidation, but also hoping that his archive spirit might inspire my looking. I dedicate this book to his memory as well.