

The “Confessions” of María Luisa Coleta

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Transcription¹

[folio 3r]

Havana y diciembre 19 de 1816

Siendo yo María Coleta natural de Santo Domingo hija legítima de Sebastián y de María Ambrosia ambos esclavos de Chambre _____ de donde fuimos vendidos a Dn. Juan Pedro Poupet el que estaba a la sazón en el Guarico en el año de [1?] cuando se ocasionó la revolución de los Negros murió en dicho Guarico envenenado como es cierto y dicho por todos..... no ha tenido ningún sobrino ni parentela que pudiese ser heredero de su bienes empezamos a huir de la guerra y después de haber corrido todo llegó a regresar en Ballajá donde estando próximo para salir los buques donde venían los emigs. de Santo Domingo solicité qu[ien] pudiese hacer cargo de pasarme pagando con m[i] trabajo el importe del flete. . vísperas de la

¹ On the original manuscript, punctuation is nearly absent, spelling is inconsistent, and capitalization is often arbitrary. To facilitate comprehension of the document, we have expanded many abbreviations, added capitalization, and inserted necessary accents. Although we have retained most original spellings, we have imposed a modest amount of standardization as between *b* and *v*, *s* and *z*, and *cu* and *qu*. The scribe was often rendering natural speech, without clear breaks between sentences. We have added extra spaces between what appear to be sentences, and to signal parenthetical phrases. Insertions in square brackets are ours and indicate an inferred letter or letters.

salida de la fragata Minerva que fue donde me embarqué lunes en la noche estuve en casa de mi
 madrina llegó una parda amiga íntima que me dio por noticias que tenía unas señoritas
 conocidas suyas que podían pasarla que llegando en la Habana le pagaría lo que le debía, ella le
 prometió decirle a las dichas señoras que tenía una pobre conocida suya que deseaba para
 [3v]

no ocasionar a que le quitasen la vida por estar embarazada de ~~blanco~~ blanco quería irse a la
 Habana que no tenía con qué pagar flete y que ella llegando a la ciudad el padre de su hijo le daría
 con qué pagar ellas al momento admitieron partido y la fue a buscar la dicha parda (que se
 llamaba María Andrea) y la condujo en su casa y ella habló con ellas y le preguntaron por su [?]
 Jamás las había tratado ni conocido, noticia, sí de ellas tenía y todos las conocen por lo que no
 dudó que decía la noche la pasé en su casa, el martes izó a la vela el buque y llegamos martes
 de la semana venidera. Nos quedamos en la fortaleza del Morro por orden del Excelentísimo Sor
 Don Luis de las Casas. Y allí estuve tres meses y parí mi hijo. Pasados algunos días de haber
 llegado la dicha Señora envía ~~se~~ un sobrino a preguntar por el nombre de mi amo. Yo le repliqué
 que no lo tenía porque era yo libre por razón de que mi amo se había quitado él propio la vida por
 evitar que no se la quitasen los negros—y que por ade[más] antes de partirse para la ciudad del
 Guarico había dicho que ya los negros estaban levantados contra los que habían venido de
 Francia. que por él a todos les daba la libertad porque iba a morir. No respondí más que no me
 acordaba de su nombre sino del apellido, por allí fue por donde me formaron la esc[ritu]ra y . . .
 la he servido mucho tiempo cuando me consideré que ya estuvo satisfecha le p[edí?] para irme de
 su casa y me dice ser su esc[lav]a no haberle costado cantidad ninguna que mostrase la escritura
 por donde me había comprado no la ha mostrado nunca estu[vo] sirviendo el espacio de veinte

a[ño]s² estando enferma, pidió confesión y habiendo ido a buscar un confesor de la religión

Fr[anciscana?] no quiso que lo fuese sino que fuera frai Felix Capuchino

[4r]

habiendo llegado le comunicó lo que tenía que decir y advirtiéndole al Sacerdote que no dejase de hacer la caridad ya que moría no quería que sus hijos [sufriesen] lo mismo. esto fue, en la primera confesión ya el padre tenía conocimiento de todo, antes de que la doliente se lo advirtiese porque entrando por la puerta estuvo un grande espacio conferenciando de lo pasado. después de haberse confesado antes de recibir la absolución, le volvió la doliente asegurar lo mismo diciéndole que lo que le había dicho no lo decía bajo de palabra de confesión, que lo comunicase al juez para que antes de morir podía hacerle ver lo verificó de su palabra bajo de un juramento su confesor le prometió que lo haría al otro día.

A los tres días después hizo su segunda confesión y lo primero que le dijo la doliente fue que si va ya su encargo empezado le respondió el confesor que no lo había puesto por obra porque al despedirse le llamó la señora y le preguntó lo que le había dicho la doliente atento a lo que ella le había dicho anteriormente, y que le dijo que se hallaba muy admirado de lo que la doliente le había dicho que lo comunicase al juez para que [?] para que viniese un escribano para notificárselo la señora le dijo lo que el padre le contestó en la segunda confesión que fue que a todos le iba a dar la libertad, y a hacer que se enmendase la partida de su bautismo porque conocía muy bien que estos bienes eran usurpados. La doliente se conformó con lo que ya tenía sabido. Se dispuso para recibir los Santos S[acramentos]. y el día 11 de enero de 1817 hizo la última

² At this point, the scribe shifts away from a rendering of María Coleta's own speech, largely in the first person, and shifts to third person verb forms.

confesión y habiendo vuelto a requerir si estaban sus hijos en buen [?]

[4v]

a lo cual le dijo el confesor que ya los tenía vía diligencia de su libertad, y que en todo caso que no lo efectuase con brevedad, y mismo andarían estos pasos que no pensara más en esto que ya corría por su cuenta basta [que] no se lo había dicho bajo de palabra de confesión.

Esto lo ha dicho la doliente.

Día trece de enero de mil ochocientos diez y siete murió María Luisa Coleta.

Translation³

Havana 19 December 1816

Being myself María Coleta born in Santo Domingo legitimate daughter of Sebastián and of María Ambrosia both slaves of Chambre ____⁴ from where we were sold to Juan Pedro Poupet who was at that time in Guarico⁵ In the year [1 ?] when there occurred the revolution of the Blacks he died in the said Guarico by poisoning as is known and said by all. he had no nephew or other relation who could be heir to his property we began to flee from the war and after having gone everywhere [she] got back to Bayajá where the boats in which the emigrants from Santo Domingo were [to embark] [the boats] being ready to leave I asked if anyone could take charge of taking me if I paid the cost of the passage with my labor. . The night before the departure of the frigate Minerva which was the one I boarded on Monday night I was in the house of my godmother there came a *parda*⁶ who was a close friend who told me the news that some *señoritas*

³ In the translation, we have added some extra spacing, implied punctuation, and modern capitalization to help clarify the meaning. The scribe begins by rendering María Coleta's narrative in first person, using present and past tense, and then shifts toward the third person and the past tense. We have inserted an implied pronoun or name in square brackets in the most confusing instances of this practice.

⁴ The family name, poorly understood by the scribe, was Lohier de Charmeraye. The property was located in the *quartier* of the Plaine du Nord, Saint Domingue.

⁵ The word Guarico could refer to the entire colony of Saint Domingue, or to the city of Cap Français. This reference seems to be to the city.

⁶ The term *parda*, in Cuban usage, refers to a girl or woman perceived as being of mixed

whom she knew could take her that when they got to Havana she would pay what was owed, she promised her she would say to these *señoras* that she had a poor acquaintance who in order not to be killed because she was pregnant by a white man hoped to go to Havana who didn't have money to pay her passage and that when she got to the city the father of her child would give her what she needed to pay they immediately agreed and the *parda* (whose name was María Andrea) came to look for her and took her to their house and she spoke with them and they asked for her [illegible] She had never seen or dealt with them before, but had news of them, and everyone knows them which is why she didn't doubt what [she] said⁷ I spent the night at their house, Tuesday the ship set sail and we arrived Tuesday of the following week We⁸ remained in the Morro fortress by orders of his excellency Don Luis de las Casas and I was there three months and I gave birth to my child.⁹ A few days after having arrived the said *señora* sends a nephew to ask for the name of my master. I replied that I did not have one because I was free for the reason that my master had himself taken his own life to prevent it from being taken by the blacks. And that also before his departure to the city of Guarico he had said that the blacks were already risen against those who had come from France.¹⁰ That he himself gave them all their freedom because

African and European (or, more rarely, mixed African and indigenous) ancestry.

⁷ The singular verb form here seems to reflect a shift from talking about the two *señoritas* or *señoras* to speaking about the one who later enslaved Coleta, Francisca Lorignac.

⁸ The implied "we" here seems to be María Coleta and her friend María Andrea.

⁹ "*Y parí mi hijo*" could refer either to "my child" or to "my son."

¹⁰ This refers to the spring 1793 arrival of the forces of General Galbaud in Cap Français. It may explain the reference to a "year 1" (of the revolutionary calendar?) in the early lines of the

he was going to die. I responded only that I didn't remember his first name, just his last name. That was where they drew up the deed [about me]. . . I have served her [Señora Lorignac] a long time when I considered that it [the debt] was satisfied I [asked]¹¹ to leave her house and she tells me that I am her slave. Not having cost anything to her let her show the deed where she had bought me she has never shown it. [She/Coleta] was serving for the space of twenty years¹² Being sick, she asked to give confession and [they] having gone to look for a confessor of the Fr[anciscan?] religion she didn't want it to be one unless it was Friar Felix Capuchin [He] having arrived she communicated what she had to say to him and warning the priest not to fail in doing her this kindness because she was dying she didn't want her children to [suffer the same].¹³ This was in the first confession but the priest already had knowledge of everything before the sick woman said it to him because entering through the door he spent a lot of time talking with people about what had happened. After having confessed before receiving absolution, the sick woman confirmed the same thing saying that what she told him she had not said under seal of confession

text.

¹¹ Here the only legible letter in the manuscript is a *p*. It could be the beginning of the word *pedí*, "I asked."

¹² The binding of the manuscript hides the last letter of the verb. The two possibilities are *estuve* (first person) and *estuvo* (third person). In either case the reference is to Coleta. At this point in the text the scribe shifts verb forms, referring to Coleta thereafter in the third person.

¹³ The verb in the phrase here is broken on the edge of the page, yielding *no quiso que sus hijos []sen lo mismo*. We infer that it may have been *sufriesen*.

that he should communicate it to the judge so that before she died [she] could make him see¹⁴ she verified it by her word under an oath her confessor promised her that he would do it the next day.

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Three days later she made her second confession and the first thing the sick woman asked him was whether the task had yet been begun. The confessor replied that he hadn't yet gotten it underway because when he had taken his leave [the last time] the *señora* had called to him and asked him what the sick woman had said to him aware of what she had said to him before and that he [the friar] said to her that he was very struck by what [she] the sick woman had told him [&?] that he would communicate it to the judge so that a scribe would come to inform [her?] of it¹⁶ the señora told him [-] what the friar answered her during the second confession which was [-] that she was going to give freedom to all of them and to have their baptismal record amended because she was well aware that these goods were usurped. The sick woman agreed with what she had now learned. She prepared herself to receive the holy sacraments and on the 11th of

¹⁴ The implied subject of the phrase is unclear and could be “he” or “she.” The phrase “para que antes de morir podía hacerle ver” appears to mean that before she died she wanted an account of her confession to be conveyed to a judge, to persuade him of the injustice that had been done to her.

¹⁵ A line across the page here indicates a break in the scribe's writing.

¹⁶ The syntax here (in “para que viniera un escribano para notificárselo”) makes it difficult to tell who was to be notified of what—perhaps the judge was to be told of Coleta's statement; perhaps Lorignac was to be formally notified of a judge's taking cognizance of the case.

January 1817 made the last confession and having asked again if her children were in good [hands?] to which the confessor said that he had already put in motion steps for their freedom, and that in any event if she [Lorignac] didn't do it quickly, these steps would continue that she [Coleta] shouldn't think about this any more because [the matter] was already in his hands and it was enough that she had not said this to him under the seal of confession.

This is what the sick woman said.

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On the thirteenth of January, 1817, María Luisa Coleta died.

Source: "El Síndico del Exmo Ayuntamiento, ctra Doña Franc[isc]a Loriñak, sobre la libertad de sus cuatro esclavos nombrados Inés Paula, M[arí]a del Socorro, María Montserrate y M[arí]a Loreto," Expediente 2100, Escribanía de Bernardo del Junco, Legajo 141, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.

¹⁷ Another line across the page, followed by the final sentence.