

María Coleta and the Capuchin Friar: Slavery, Salvation, and the Adjudication of Status

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This article explores the dynamics of the enslavement of free persons of African descent, tracing the process by which acts of force were clothed in robes of law. Freed by the abolition of slavery in Saint Domingue/Haiti, could a young woman called María Coleta maintain her freedom once she left the island of Hispaniola to seek out the father of her unborn child? The answer seemed to be no. In the years that followed her arrival in Havana in 1796, Coleta was claimed and held as a slave by Francisca Lorignac, who had advanced payment for Coleta's passage to Cuba. Each child subsequently born to Coleta was baptized into slavery. In December 1816, Coleta became deathly ill, and a Capuchin friar was called to administer last rites. But Coleta insisted that she would accept absolution only if the friar made a written record of her narrative and submitted it to a judge to initiate a suit for freedom for her daughters. The lawsuit that followed—whose case file opens with a transcript of Coleta's *confesiones*—reveals both a deep indeterminacy of status emerging from the Haitian Revolution and the uncertain path toward legal redress in a neighboring slaveholding society.