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Panel 4: Campesinos, esclavas y revolucionarias

Ponencia: “From Slave to Moneylender: Disentangling Lines of Debt and Credit in Popayán, Colombia, 1783-1808”

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In 1783, Francisca Collazos begged a judge in Popayán City to make a soldier repay the loan she gave him because as a poor woman, she needed “to pay her grocery store’s rent and take care of her own debts.”¹ Although the soldier Melchor López admitted under oath that Francisca Collazos “kindly” lent him money in cash and food so he could take care of his ill father, he argued that his legal status as a minor protected him from paying back the debt. In her response, Francisca claimed to have no knowledge of soldier López’s underage status and rhetorically asked the court why a minor could enroll in military service. In addition, she argued that soldier López’s legal status as a minor did not make her pleas for debt repayment irrelevant. According to her, women were to receive the same treatment and protection as minors under the law and she, after all, was an “ignorant black woman.”²

This former black slave, however, was anything but ignorant. Francisca worked as a shopkeeper and apparently offered small loans in food and money to some of her customers. This money lending created complicated networks of credit and debt that involved people from all racial and class backgrounds, increasing the potential for conflict if a loan was not repaid. Francisca appears through the record as a smart, relentless woman using a variety of moral arguments to recover her money even after the soldier had left the city most likely to fight in the incipient wars of independence. Her determination is more impressive when one considers that the dispute over the loan she gave to soldier López remained active for twenty-five years. Why would a dispute over a loan remain active for so long? What explains Francisca’s determination to get paid? What can we learn about the world she lived in as a freedwoman? In this paper, I attempt to answer these questions through a close reading and interpretation of her case, showing how a black woman’s

¹ “Ordinario Francisca Collazos contra Melchor López por intereses” (hereafter Ordinario), Archivo Central del Cauca (hereafter ACC), Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 4r.

² “Ordinario,” Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 28r.

engagement with the late colonial legal system can reveal intricate social dynamics in Popayán between 1783 and 1808.

In 1786, after several court sessions, Francisca Collazos won her case against the soldier who refused to pay back a loan she gave him. The court ruled that the soldier use his deceased mother's inheritance to pay Francisca the amount she lent him plus any interest. The soldier responded that he had lent that capital to a butcher who had died recently, making it impossible for him to get his money back. Francisca called attention to the deceased man's *mortuaria* (will) and the court finally ordered the person in charge of administering the will to pay Francisca on behalf of the soldier.³ Francisca, however, did not get paid as the will's executor ignored the ruling and the soldier was nowhere to be found, leaving us wondering if his disappearance was related to his military service in the incipient wars of independence. This period was one of political instability and social uncertainty throughout the Popayán Province, a vast region in the Colombian southwest encompassing the Pacific lowlands, the Andean highlands, and part of the Amazon plains and jungles.⁴ Popayán City, built between the western and central Andean mountains, was the Province's administrative capital as well as the second major slave-trading center in Colombia after Cartagena. Groups of African slaves arrived from current-day Panama and Cartagena to the Popayán slave market, often through contraband transactions, to be sold to the mining districts in the Pacific and the markets in Ecuador.⁵

The slave market largely defined the social and political characteristics of the city and the province of Popayán. From the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, the city was an important meeting point for elite miners and merchants who conducted business, engaged in political matters, and invested in the Pacific gold mining industry.⁶ As absentee mine owners and/or *encomenderos*, elites lived comfortable lifestyles in Popayán

³ "Ordinario," Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 32r.v.

⁴ For a study of the complex geography and natural landscape in colonial Colombia, see Edgardo Pérez Morales, *La obra de Dios y el trabajo del hombre. Percepción y transformación de la naturaleza en el virreinato del Nuevo Reino de Granada* (Medellín: Centro de Publicaciones – Universidad Nacional de Colombia Sede Medellín, 2011).

⁵ By the 1730s, the Colombian Pacific corridor, which stretched from current-day southern Panama to northern Ecuador, had been fully integrated into the world economy through intensive gold mining and the massive importation of African slaves. Interestingly, however, unlike the major mining zones in Peru, Mexico, and Brazil, the mining districts of Colombia remained underdeveloped and largely unpopulated because of their "inhospitable" location. Travelers and investors of the period often described the Pacific lowlands as a hot and humid forest area where only the black population could survive its hostility.

⁶ See Germán Colmenares, *Historia económica y social de Colombia II - Popayán: una sociedad esclavista, 1680-1800* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1997); Sherwin Bryant, "Finding Gold, Forming Slavery: The Creation of a Classic Slave Society, Popayán, 1600-1700," *The Americas* 63 (2006): 81-112; Robert C. West, *Colonial Placer Mining in Colombia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952).

City by hiring poor Spanish immigrants to oversee their mines in the Pacific, relying on the work of domestic slaves, and demanding food as tribute from Indians.⁷ The strategic marriage alliances between well off Spaniards and creoles in Popayán City formed the basis for a vibrant elite society that was Catholic, conservative, and deeply committed to the preservation of the institution of slavery.⁸ In the late eighteenth century, however, the economic structures that supported this elite society began to crumble with the severe decline in gold production. The depletion and growing abandonment of gold mines in the Pacific lowlands not only resulted in losses for the miners, but also in the gradual collapse of *hacienda* production, which provided food supplies to the mines.⁹ Scholars have linked the dramatically low levels of gold mine and *hacienda* production to high slave manumission rates from the 1750s to the 1820s, particularly of enslaved women, throughout the province.¹⁰

Francisca Collazos may have been one of those women, as she had been a slave at Hacienda Perodíaz owned by the Hurtado family prior to moving to Popayán City as a freedwoman.¹¹ Although the judicial record does not contain details about her manumission process, it does reveal Collazos's participation in the city's informal economy. In the first half of the case against soldier López, the record shows how her simple request to get paid turned into a long process. It not only ignited discussions about the protections of minors

⁷ See Germán Colmenares. *La Independencia. Ensayos de historia social* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1986).

⁸ See Colmenares, *Historia económica y social*, chaps. 10 and 14.

⁹ Scholars have explained the co-dependency between the mines and the haciendas through the flows of investment capital, food and tools, and gold mining and how they complemented each other. In this way, the distinctive aspects of the urban and the rural worked together to sustain the institution of slavery in the region and, along with it, the defining racial and class hierarchies that people of the time conceived and assigned to spatial boundaries.

¹⁰ See Colmenares, *Historia económica y social*; William F. Sharp, *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier: The Colombian Chocó, 1680-1810* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); David L. Chandler, "Family Bonds and the Bondsman: The Slave Family in Colonial Colombia" *Latin American Research Review* 16:2 (1981): 107-131. Sergio Mosquera, "Los procesos de manumisión en las provincias del Chocó" in *Afrodescendientes en las Américas: trayectorias sociales e identitarias - 150 años de la abolición de la esclavitud en Colombia*, ed. Claudia Mosquera (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002): 99-119; Orián Jiménez Meneses, "El Chocó: libertad y poblamiento 1750-1850" in *Afrodescendientes en las Américas: trayectorias sociales e identitarias - 150 años de la abolición de la esclavitud en Colombia*, ed. Claudia Mosquera (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002): 121-141; Mario Diego Romero, *Poblamiento y sociedad en el pacífico colombiano. Siglos XVI al XVIII* (Cali: Universidad del Valle, 1995).

¹¹ "Ordinario," Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 43r.v. References to free black and mulatto women and their occupations have sporadically appeared in the historical scholarship in Colombia. See, for instance, Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez, *Sentimientos y vida familiar en el Nuevo Reino de Granada, siglo XVIII* (Bogotá: Editorial Ariel, 1997); Orián Jiménez Meneses, *El Chocó: el paraíso del demonio: Novita, Citará, y el Baudó, siglo XVIII* (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 2004); Rafael Díaz, "¿Es posible la libertad en la esclavitud? A propósito de la tensión entre la libertad y la esclavitud en la Nueva Granada," *Historia Crítica* 24 (2002), 67-77; Inírida Morales, "Mujer negra, mirar del otro y resistencias. Nueva Granada siglo XVIII," *Memoria & Sociedad* 15 (2003): 53-68; María Teresa Pérez Hernández, "Prácticas y representaciones en torno a la familia, el género y la raza. Popayán en 1807," *Convergencia* 37 (2005).

and women under the law, but also involved people, like the soldier's mother and the butcher, whose death disclosed complicated lines of debt and repayment. Tracking down debtors and actually making them pay was not an easy task in a society where cash flows were minimal as a consequence of the economic crisis posed by the decreasing mining production. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that people would turn to credit, even if it involved transactions with lower class black women, in order to cover basic necessities.

In this social context of economic decline and expansion of debt/credit networks in which black freedwoman like Francisca were reshaping the system of hierarchy/dependency, the Popayán elite strongly opposed some of the Bourbon reforms that, in their view, would have accelerated their ruin. Popayán slave owners furiously opposed the 1789 *Real cédula de instrucción*, a slave code by which the Bourbons attempted to regulate slave owners' physical and psychological treatment of their slaves through Catholic priests who would impart religious teachings.¹² Slave owners argued that the Code interfered with their authority while promoting rebellious behavior among their slaves, many of whom had already initiated legal action against them based on allegations of abuse.¹³ Even though the Popayán elites were successful in getting the Code suspended, there was an increase of collective slave denunciations against their masters in the city courts in 1790. In that same year, Francisca may have crossed paths with some of those slaves as the records show that she filed a letter in court. She demanded that her money be extracted from the estate of a deceased man she had never met. The court acknowledged Francisca's right to recover her money and notified the will's executor to take action.¹⁴ Once again, however, the ruling would not do much as Francisca went on without getting paid.

If the first half of Francisca's case was complex, the second half gets even more complicated and revealing when a white widow sues Francisca in 1803. Upon learning about Francisca's pending case with the soldier, the widow argued that in 1796, she lent Francisca three pieces of jewelry supposedly to be used at a marriage, but Francisca never returned them. According to the widow, it was Francisca's enslaved mulatto daughter –

¹² Marcela Echeverri, "Conflicto y hegemonía en el suroccidente de la Nueva Granada, 1780-1800," *Fronteras de la historia* 11 (2006): 355-387

¹³ Marcela Echeverri, "'Enraged to the limit of despair': Infanticide and Slave Judicial Strategies in Barbacoas, 1788-98," *Slavery and Abolition* 30:3 (2009): 403-426. For other works on slaves and the law see Sherwin Bryant, "Enslaved Rebels, Fugitives, and Litigants: The Resistance Continuum in Colonial Quito," *Colonial Latin American Review* 13:1 (2004): 7-46; Alejandro de la Fuente, "Slaves and the Creation of Legal Rights in Cuba: Coartación and Papel," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 87:4 (2007): 659-92.

¹⁴ "Ordinario," Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 43v.

María Manuela – who picked up the jewelry from her house.¹⁵ Through the widow’s deposition, we learn that Francisca had a young daughter who was still a slave at a *hacienda* in the outskirts of Popayán City. From the information in the records, we can infer that Francisca and her daughter had a close relationship in spite of being geographically separated and having different legal statuses. The fact that Francisca’s daughter picked up the jewelry suggests not only that there was communication between the two, but also that the enslaved daughter traveled from the *hacienda* to the city periodically to meet with her mother and run this kind of errand. This case highlights how mobility across space strengthened matrifocal family ties between enslaved and free women, particularly at a critical political time such as the late 1790s in Popayán.¹⁶

By 1803, Popayán Province was at the brink of war. Discontent over the absolutism of the Bourbons dramatically shaped relationships among the landed elites. Rumors about slave owners’ support or opposition to the tyranny of the Bourbons began to unleash tensions and animosities that would concretely materialize after Napoléon Bonaparte’s invasion of Spain in 1808 and the subsequent irruption of autonomist political projects throughout colonial Colombia that turned into bitter civil wars.¹⁷ Concerned about the potential of war, Popayán City’s government carried out a census in 1807 presumably to count the number of men available for military recruitment. María Teresa Pérez Hernández’s analysis of the census shows that women constituted 60 percent of the total population and the majority of them were mestizas, enslaved and free black and mulatto

¹⁵ “Ordinario,” Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 44r.v.

¹⁶ The bond between Francisca and her daughter across perceived geographical boundaries is reminiscent of Lasmanuelos family in Christine Hünefeldt’s *Paying the Price of Freedom*. The Lasmanuelos family lived and worked together in their owner’s *hacienda* until the mother, Manuela, bought her freedom with the family’s savings and moved to the city of Lima to work and save to liberate the rest of her family. According to Hünefeldt, it was more common for women in slave families to buy their own freedom first because they were usually cheaper than men and it seemed easier for them to become part of the informal labor market in the city. In the historical scholarship on family in Colombia, these scholars have addressed the issue of matrifocality during the late colonial and early republican period: Mario Diego Romero, *Poblamiento y sociedad*; Pablo Rodríguez Jiménez, *Sentimientos y vida familiar*; Rafael Díaz, “¿Es posible la libertad en la esclavitud?; María Teresa Pérez Hernández, “Prácticas y representaciones”; Guiomar Dueñas, *Los hijos del pecado* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1997). For perspectives about matrifocality and slavery outside Colombia, see Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba; A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes and Aisnara Perera Díaz, *Esclavitud, familia y parroquia en Cuba: Otra mirada desde la microhistoria* (Santiago de Cuba: Oriental Ediciones, 2008); María del Carmen Barcia Zequeira, *La otra familia. Parientes, redes y descendencia de los esclavos en Cuba* (La Habana: Fondo Editorial Casa de las Américas, 2003).

¹⁷ See Oscar Almario García, “Reflexiones sobre la independencia en el suroccidente de Colombia” in *El Nuevo Reino de Granada y sus provincias. Crisis de la Independencia y experiencias republicanas*, ed. Aristides Ramos (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2009): 88-121; *La invención del suroccidente colombiano. Historiografía de la Gobernación de Popayán y el Gran Cauca, Siglos XVIII y XIX* (Medellín: Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, 2005); Alfonso Múnera, *El fracaso de la nación. Región, clase y raza en el Caribe Colombiano, 1717-1821* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2008); Víctor Uribe-Urán, *Honorable Lives: Lawyers, Family, and Politics in Colombia, 1780-1850* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

women.¹⁸ Moreover, the census revealed that out of 1094 registered heads of households, 51 percent were women and 49 percent were men. Interestingly, in spite of the slight difference, 31 percent of the men declared they had a partner and only 6 percent of the women did. This shows that along with male-headed nuclear families, female-headed households and single motherhood were remarkably prevalent throughout the city. Most female household heads were black, mulatto, and mestiza seamstresses and food vendors.

Popayán elites' anxieties over the high prospects of war in the region in the first decade of the nineteenth century led to a census that showed the "army of [free and colored] women," as Pérez Hernández called them, who lived and worked in the city. One of them, Francisca Collazos, complied with her legal obligation to respond to the widow's lawsuit by acknowledging that the widow's jewelry was indeed used in a wedding celebration. However, along with that acknowledgement came the confession that a difficult economic situation forced her to pawn the jewelry. Francisca's enslaved daughter, María Manuela, took the jewelry to her master, who agreed to loan her an amount of money for the items.¹⁹ Here, María Manuela once again acted as her mother's interlocutor and successfully conducted the transaction with her master, expanding an already intricate line of debt before leaving for the mining district. This specific scenario raises more questions than it answers: under what conditions did the widow lend her jewelry to Francisca? Whose wedding was celebrated and where? What explains the María Manuela's physical mobility and ability to help her mother conduct business in and outside her own site of captivity?²⁰

This last question inevitably generates a more pressing one: what were the meanings of freedom and slavery in early nineteenth-century Popayán Province? The case of Francisca Collazos invites us to grapple with this question from a microhistorical dimension by considering how Francisca and María Manuela fortified their bonds while blurring the definitions of "freedom" through their activities. Francisca's work as shopkeeper and moneylender allowed her to incorporate herself to an urban context, making a living while expanding her interactions and connections to a diverse group of

¹⁸ Of Popayán City's 7,064 inhabitants of all ages in 1807, 2,787 were male (478 whites, 1,260 mestizos, 115 Indians, 473 free mulattos, 33 free blacks, 428 enslaved blacks and mulattos) and 4,277 were female (530 whites, 1745 mestizas, 239 Indians, 745 free mulattas, 87 free blacks, 931 enslaved blacks and mulattas). Pérez Hernández, "Prácticas y representaciones," 223.

¹⁹ "Ordinario," Colonia Judicial II-20 Civil, sig. 10477, f. 45r.v.

²⁰ Historian Orián Jiménez has coined the term "libertad transitoria" to explain the spatial mobility that some slaves in the Pacific mining districts enjoyed when their overseers sent them hunting or in search of new gold deposits. Jiménez complicates the slave/*libre* dichotomy and adds a new dimension to understand the degrees of freedom slaves might have experienced during their captivity. Jiménez's framework seems relevant in putting María Manuela's mobility into context, showing that it was not unusual. See Jiménez, *El Chocó*, 70.

people. As we have seen, such interactions were crucial as they led to complicated networks of debt that reshaped social and family relations across different spaces. They shaped Francisca's life as a freedwoman whose socioeconomic transactions were often mediated by her daughter María Manuela, in spite of the latter's legal status as a *hacienda* slave. If freedom is, as some scholars have argued, not a natural state, but a social construct rooted in specific experiences in time, then the case of Francisca and María Manuela may exemplify how ideas and contradictions about slavery and freedom that circulated in a slave society like Popayán were lived on the ground.²¹

²¹ Frederick Cooper, Rebecca J. Scott and Thomas Holt, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9.

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