

Conceiving FREEDOM



Women of
Color, Gender,
and the Abolition
of Slavery in
Havana and
Rio de Janeiro



Camillia Cowling

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FREEDOM



*Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery
in Havana and Rio de Janeiro*

CAMILLIA COWLING

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Conceiving Freedom

*To my parents,
Mark and Amani Cowling,
with love and gratitude*

Acknowledgments

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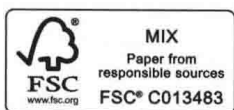
This book is dedicated to my parents, Amani and Mark Cowling, who helped me take my first steps on the journey. They have given me so much more than I could ever say. Their resilience and generosity in the face of their own troubles inspire me to tackle my own much smaller ones. Mark Cowling kindly read and gave helpful comments on the manuscript. Sophie and Ralph Cowling have supported me always, adding a touch of mischievous humor whenever things were getting too serious.

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Note on Currency

In the period discussed in this book, Brazilian currency was the *mil-réis* (1,000 *réis*), written 1\$000. A *conto* was 1,000 *mil-réis*.

Currency in Cuba was the *peso*. Inflation was very high in the 1870s and 1880s, with values especially fluctuating for money in notes (*billetes*). Amounts in *billetes* were typically worth less than those in gold. All amounts quoted in this book are in gold, unless otherwise stated.



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Introduction



*The Supplicant demands that action on this matter be taken,
not only for the authority of this Court to be respected, but also for the
child Maria to be handed to her.*

*—Joaquim Monteiro, on behalf of Josepha Gonçalves de Moraes,
Rio de Janeiro, 26 July 1886*

One sweltering August day in the Caribbean summer of 1883, in Havana, Cuba, a freedwoman named Ramona Oliva made a petition to the offices of the island's governor general. She requested custody of her four children, María Fabiana, Agustina, Luis, and María de las Nieves, who were being held by Ramona's former owner, Manuel Oliva, on his farm in Matanzas, in the sugar-growing heartland of western Cuba. Ramona had purchased her own freedom the previous year, but she could not rest until her children could enjoy the rights she thought should apply to them under the new laws for the gradual abolition of slavery that had been enacted by Spain for colonial Cuba.¹

Almost exactly one year later, in August 1884, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, freedwoman Josepha Gonçalves de Moraes embarked upon a court case to wrest custody of her ten-year-old daughter, Maria, away from Josepha's former owners, José Gonçalves de Pinho and his wife Maria Amélia da Silva Pinho. Josepha filed her statement in the same month of the year as Ramona, yet, unlike her Caribbean counterpart, she was perhaps shivering rather than sweating as she walked the city's streets to visit the lawyer who drafted her petition. August was the middle of Rio de Janeiro's winter, when its shores were often lashed by storms whipped up over the grey,

brooding Atlantic, bringing drizzle and chilly winds that swept across the city.²

The contrast in the seasons alone reminds us of the sheer physical distance—over 4,000 miles—that separated these two women. Both lived in what today we call “Latin America,” a region whose similarities appear evident when viewed from the outside, yet which often unravel when viewed from the vantage-point of any one of its many nations or of their many distinct regions, languages, and cultures. Even today, a direct flight from Rio to Havana—the same distance as from London to Calcutta, or from New York to Istanbul—would take a long, tiring nine hours. Josepha’s and Ramona’s petitions were made in two different languages, within legal and bureaucratic systems that had developed along contrasting historical trajectories, in two countries whose differences could hardly be more apparent.³ Yet each woman’s actions and aims, and the circumstances from which they arose, were also strikingly similar.

In fact, in each city, women claimants like Josepha and Ramona made up over half—and probably a significant majority—of the enslaved and freed people who approached the law during the gradual process of emancipation that occurred in both Brazil and Cuba over the 1870s and 1880s.⁴ In each case, historians have revealed much about how enslaved people’s relationship with the law helped both to accelerate the course of emancipation and to define what freedom would come to mean.⁵ Women appear in significant numbers across the pages of their works, yet we know less about how and why they came to make specific contributions to these processes.⁶ Their stories—or rather, the parts of their stories about which we can claim to know something—are woven throughout this book. Ramona and Josepha are only two examples among many women who appear in these pages, whose individually small but cumulatively significant actions helped shape the course of emancipation and construct freedom’s meanings in these last two American slaveholding territories.

Focusing on an arena of social and legal change where women were so prominent is interesting because much of what we know about enslaved people’s attempts to attain freedom or change the conditions of their enslavement—marronage, crime, armed conflict—tells us primarily about the actions of enslaved men.⁷ Tales of long, dry courtroom battles may appear less compelling than, in Jane Landers’s words, “a daring and dangerous escape from closely supervised plantations, followed by a harrowing chase” that “is most often depicted as a male endeavor, as in the case of war.”⁸ Such are the images that often spring to mind as representing enslaved “resistance,” even as historians have increasingly moved away

from dichotomizing “resistance” and “accommodation.” Yet quiet, ongoing attempts to free oneself or one’s child through legal means, made in increasing numbers as slavery’s institutional and political edifice began to crumble, collectively presented a challenge that was, in its way, at least as significant as other, more dramatic actions. Nor should legal routes out of enslavement be thought of as “merely” individual strategies.⁹ Close reading and contextualizing reveals how they were the product of collective networks of support and communication, while legal developments as a whole were intimately connected to the broader sweep of political changes that occurred with gradual abolition. In the large, fluid cities of Rio de Janeiro and Havana, newspapers informed influential city residents of the progress of slaves’ court cases; individual petitions influenced politics and jurisprudence; and slaves’ relatives sought connections with entities as diverse as abolition societies, British consuls, the Brazilian royal family, and Spanish colonial officials.

Engaging with women’s specific actions in this regard helps us notice how, in two different societies, slavery was a gendered concept—both in theory and in the practice of daily life. This in turn opens a series of crucial questions for understanding the broader dynamics of these and other postslavery contexts. In what specific ways did women experience enslavement and why? Did they seek particular routes toward freedom, and what impact did their actions have on the overall transition process in each case? How might shifting, contested notions about masculinity and femininity have affected the quest of the enslaved for legal freedom, or helped shape the very definition of what freedom came to mean? How did gendered norms intersect with changing ideas about race and citizenship to influence or reflect social and legal change?

Taking seriously slave agency within broader abolition processes has helped two generations of scholars to shed light on slaves’ and freed-people’s roles in seeking citizenship and national belonging. In the same way, paying close attention to women’s activities can both reveal their contributions to broader national developments and shed light on the changing politics of gender that underpinned those developments. Free Cuban woman of color Mariana Grajales, the much-lauded mother of independence fighter Antonio Maceo, is commemorated in Cuba today as a symbol of women’s contributions to abolition, independence, and nation-building.¹⁰ Yet as Mariana sacrificed her sons to die in the wars for independent Cuba, so countless other women engaged in protracted legal struggles to ensure their children might live lives in freedom. In Brazil, Princess Isabel’s image as the “Redeemer,” who freed the nation’s slaves