



Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World (Early American Places)

Michele Reid-Vazquez

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Michele Reid-Vazquez reveals the untold story of the strategies of negotiation used by free blacks in the aftermath of the “Year of the Lash”—a wave of repression in Cuba that had great implications for the Atlantic World in the next two decades.

At dawn on June 29, 1844, a firing squad in Havana executed ten accused ringleaders of the Conspiracy of La Escalera, an alleged plot to abolish slavery and colonial rule in Cuba. The condemned men represented prominent members of Cuba’s free community of African descent, including the acclaimed poet Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés). In an effort to foster a white majority and curtail black rebellion, Spanish colonial authorities also banished, imprisoned, and exiled hundreds of free blacks, dismantled the militia of color, and accelerated white immigration projects.

Scholars have debated the existence of the Conspiracy of La Escalera for over a century, yet little is known about how those targeted by the violence responded. Drawing on archival material from Cuba, Mexico, Spain, and the United States, Reid-Vazquez provides a critical window into understanding how free people of color challenged colonial policies of terror and pursued justice on their own terms using formal and extralegal methods. Whether rooted in Cuba or cast into the Atlantic World, free men and women of African descent stretched and broke colonial expectations of their codes of conduct locally and in exile. Their actions underscored how black agency, albeit fragmented, worked to destabilize repression’s impact.

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