ABSTRACT

AFRO-WEST INDIANS IN SEARCH OF THE SPANISH MAIN: THE TRINIDAD-VENEZUELA REFERENT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Michael Ferguson Toussaint

This thesis focuses on the migration of Afro-West Indians from Trinidad to Venezuela in the nineteenth century, in a phase coinciding roughly with that between the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars and the settlement of the Guyana-Esequiba border dispute by international arbitration. Within that period, thousands of West Indians, often using Trinidad as a springboard, trickled to the Spanish Main. Except for the territories adjacent to and north of the Orinoco and adjacent to and south of the Demerara, the Mainland constituted then something of a no-man's land. It is the contention of this thesis that, although overlooked, these movements constitute an important part of the Afro-West Indian emigration dynamic. They formed the basis of the evolution of the Afro-West Indian Diaspora on the Spanish Main.

Our study confronts the traditional approach to emigration from West Indian islands as a development shaped entirely by market forces. It considers emigration between Trinidad and Venezuela as shaped by unique geographical and historical circumstances between these two territories and as the continuity of a tradition begun by the Amerindians and their European overlords. Some of the nineteenth century emigrations of Afro-West Indians were illegal and reflected their search for freedom and opportunities on the
Spanish Main. An examination of these emigrations allows for consideration of the forced and voluntary movements of Afro-descended groups during the period of British slavery, the years immediately following Emancipation and in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Far from being purely a response to market forces, these movements reflected also the complex interplay of racism and imperial policy.

KEYWORDS: Migration; Afro-West Indians; nineteenth century; Spanish Main; Trinidad, Venezuela; Slavery; Emancipation; Racism, Imperial Policy.

A number of academics at UWI, St. Augustine, have been very helpful. I am grateful to Dr. Duncelot Cowie of the Department of Liberal Arts for providing me with much needed guidance and assistance during my sojourn in Venezuela. I am indebted to Professor Djordje Ralsthr of the Department of English for permitting me to use his personal collection of calypso tape recordings. I am similarly indebted to Dr. Sylvia Maria Moodie-Kubilus, Director of the Centre for Language Learning and Dr. Kelvin Lynch, Head of the Department of History. Both provided me with and directed me to useful material for my research.

Above all, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Fitzroy André Baptiste. The pursuit of non-conventional fields of historiographical enquiry is not always appreciated by even the best among academics. From inception, however, I had Dr. Baptiste’s encouragement and support. His unceasing commitment and dedication has had much to do with the realisation of this project.

Finally, I wish to thank the following UWI personnel: Ms. Jacqueline Williams of the Computer Centre UWI; Ms. Jan Rodriguez of the Department of Behavioral Science; Alex James of the Institute of International Relations; and Ms. Nadine Spiteri of the School of Education. Each played important roles in formatting this thesis for submission.