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Title

**“Up from Slavery: Afro-consciousness and Action in the
Nineteenth Century”**

**Presented at the UNESCO’ Youth Symposium
“Up from Slavery: Struggle, Transformation, Action”
University of the West Indies
St. Augustine**

August 18, 2005

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By
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The distinguished African-American writer Mayo Angelou provides us with a context in which to determine the format of this discourse. She writes:

“You may write me down in history,
With you bitter, twisted lies
You may trod me into the dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise...

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise...¹

I rise
Bringing the gift that my ancestors gave me
I am the dream and the hope of the slave....”

Implicit in these words are many considerations for the discussion of the theme with which this Conference is confronted. There is, firstly, the whole disparaging and dehumanizing experience of slavery and the misconceptions to which it led and on which it fed. Notions of the natural inferiority of

blacks and a calling to subservience, imbibed by the North Atlantic and the dominant classes in the New World meant that no declaration of legal emancipation could produce a complete break with the past. It is always possibly to enact laws that remove or confer certain rights. The more difficult challenge is removal of the prejudices that would inform how groups are perceived notwithstanding. The reality of freedom could not be determined solely by the deliberations of the ruling class. The perception and involvement of the subjugated group would have been critical to the realization of the genuine article. The irony of emancipation is that nowhere were the Afro-descended consulted in determining the form that emancipation might take.

The expression "Up from Slavery" recalls Booker T. Washington's autobiographical account of the experience of African-American enslavement and emancipation in the United States. But the text is equally an admission that in the nineteenth century the expression really meant getting as far as was possibly in an environment in which aspirations towards equality were to be frustrated.

As with its predecessor Proclamation of 1834, that of British emancipation in 1838 was a definitive moment. But it did not bring with it full freedom. What was introduced was the prohibition of chattel slavery in British colonial territory. The Afro-descended were no longer enslaved according to law. Legally the Afro-descended masses were free. In reality, however, freedom was very far away. At any moment in time there are differentiae between what obtains in law and fact. This was significantly so in the post emancipation environment, in which attempts would have been made to

either maintain the status quo or re-enslave the freedmen through new or surreptitious dispensations of servitude.

If this was the situation within British Colonies, it is always worth considering also that here legal emancipation would for another half century exist contemporaneously with legal enslavement in the wider New World. Freedom in the British West Indies was checked by the very existence of slavery outside of British territory.

A third consideration evolves naturally from differing interpretations of freedom. To be sure, the formerly enslaved saw in the new dispensation the opportunity to achieve what was so commonly and easily available to whites. Unless forced to think otherwise, for the formally enslaved freedom was expected to mean the same thing that it meant for their former legal masters: freedom of mobility; to acquire and enjoy property; to pursue occupations they perceived beneficial to themselves as individuals or as a class; freedom to pursue political agitation; freedom from obligations to the planter; freedom of worship and to aspire; freedom of leisure and to express their point of view.

These were among the several domains of freedom to which the ruling classes were opposed and which were fettered. This is the environment in respect of which we seek to ascertain or access the consciousness, aspirations and actions of Afro-West Indians in the nineteenth century. Considering the many limitations that existed and stumbling blocks put in the way of the realization of freedom, it becomes possible to appreciate significantly the achievements of Afro-descended people in the New Worlds

in the post emancipation period. This apart, some of their achievements were phenomenal by any standard and might make certain current achievements pale by comparison.

A question that now emerges is to which of the post emancipation periods does one refer? The chains of slavery were first broken in Haiti in 1794. The declaration of freedom in Haiti, for example, was revisited with the re-introduction of slavery by the French government under Bonaparte in 1802, to be reclaimed by the Haitians afterward. Subsequently, gradual emancipation was introduced in Argentina in 1813 and in Columbia in 1814. The genuine article was expected to take time. After Bolivar's declaration of freedom in the middle of the second decade slavery was re-instituted and freedom had to wait until the 1850s. Emancipation came to Chile in 1823, Central America in 1824, Mexico in 1829 and Bolivar in 1831, with attendant constraints to deny the consummate investiture.

When British emancipation was proclaimed in 1834 the colonial authorities in Antigua took the decision to forego apprenticeship and to cut to the chase, straightaway implementing full and complete emancipation. Even so, obstacles were placed in the way of freedom of movement, so as fetter migration. For other New World territories, emancipation came following the 'great' British example of 1838, firstly to enslaved inhabitants of the French and Danish colonies in 1848, later to Ecuador in 1851, Peru in 1854 and the Dutch colonies in 1863. Emancipation was declared in the United States in 1865, but was revisited by a series of laws which all but re-enslaved the Afro-descended community, until these were removed in consequence of Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. Systems maintenance

mechanisms were also concomitants of the emancipation of the enslaved in Puerto Rico in 1873, and in Cuba and Brazil in 1886 and 1888 respectively.

Taking into account developments from the time of the Haitian experience at the beginning of the century to that of Brazil near its end, this period can be considered a long century in which the emancipation process was staggered across the New World, within which freed Afro-descended people remained basically “unfree”, through various levels of “non-freedom” that either lingered on or were introduced.

The tendency is to discuss emancipation in the narrow spatial context limiting focus to specific areas within the region. This sometimes obscures the connections between events occurring in the region and, with that, how developments in one area affected aspirations and options in others.

I have chosen the British West Indies, as its developments were reflected in Trinidad. However certain experiences were representative of a more panoramic reality. Nowhere in the New World, for example, did legal termination of slavery result in the realization of genuine freedom for the formally enslaved. As such “Up from Slavery” meant basically rising to challenge the system to achieve “the dream of the slave”, not that which former masters had for him.

The Trinidad example is instructive. As with other enslaved groups in the New World the Afro-descended in Trinidad did not accept enslavement. Confronting any notion that slaves there acquiesced to slavery, as they were “presumably” better treated than elsewhere, are reports of planned and

unplanned but basically unsuccessful resistance efforts which suggest that the Afro-descended community on the island did not respond to enslavement with resignation.

In December 1805, for example, the colonial authorities discovered and preempted a plot by enslaved blacks of the Diego Martin, Carenage and Maraval districts to stage a rebellion on Christmas Day. The intention was to destroy the whites on the island and set up a black state. The revolt was hastily planned by blacks who had originally organized themselves into various secret societies to preserve their religious and other cultural practices, but became so inspired by the Haitian revolt that they quickly hatched a plan to overthrow the authorities in Trinidad. Some twenty to thirty of those involved were arrested. A number of them were tried, convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. But their sentences became difficult to execute because of complications arising from the fact that relations between master and slaves in Trinidad was subject to Spanish law.

Between 1812 and 1816, conflict erupted between the royalists and patriots in nearby Venezuela as the latter had declared the territory independent of Spain. The high level of movement to and from Trinidad by the warring factions provided the opportunity for enslaved persons from the island to steal boats and sail to the Spanish Main. Many were inspired by the heroic exploits of Santiago Mariño who in 1813, at the helm of an expedition launched from the Trinidad island of Chacachacare, defeated royalist forces in Guiria on Venezuela's Gulf Coast and heralded a new and glorious second phase in Venezuela's struggle for independence.

Marino's expedition consisted largely of blacks and coloreds. In escaping Trinidad for the Main, one objective was to join troops belonging to Simon Bolivar who had declared freedom in Venezuela. Another was to find a zone of freedom on the sparsely populated east coast of Venezuela. Not surprisingly, after the passing of this period of unrest in Venezuela the practice of running away to the Main continued, becoming more significant after 1834 as apprentices crossed the Gulf of Paria to escape obligations to planters.

Meanwhile, in Trinidad from time to time the colonial authorities found it necessary to organize raids in search of maroons. Settlement in Trinidad was concentrated mainly on the western littoral of the island and as such the interior was a safe haven for maroons.

In 1832 there was a riot in Marabella when it was rumored that slavery was to be abolished and this did not materialize. Similarly, in 1834, when the large crowd that gathered in Port of Spain to hear the emancipation proclamation realized that full freedom had not come, several arrests had to be made to maintain the peace. Only the overwhelming presence of the Militia, Cavalry and Infantry averted violent clash of the masses with the authorities.

In June 1837, Donald Stewart (also known as Daaga), an African chief belonging to the 1st West India Regiment, led 280 fellow African-descended officers in a mutiny at St Joseph. This particular military unit had won battle honors for distinguishing itself in expeditions against Martinique, Guadeloupe and St Lucia, and had earned the respect of British troops every.

Its officers were men who enjoyed considerable freedom and prestige in the local community, so much so that there are those who might consider Daaga a rebel without a cause.

In the 1830s a group of Mandingo practitioners of Islam, all of whom had long acquired freedom, submitted several petitions to the British Crown to facilitate them with a return trip in a British vessel to their ancestral homeland. Their requests were denied.

The evidence suggests that the enslaved tended to define what freedom meant for themselves, and that their appreciation of freedom and what it should be to them could not be dictated by the colonial or imperial authorities. For them, it was not possible to tolerate enslavement in period of slavery, nor the constraints associated with the post emancipation freedom.

In this period, because of an increased amount of group activity, it is possible to place the actions of certain individuals into context, as there is greater articulation of the philosophy and ideology of some of the thinkers and activists. One of them was George Numa Dessources, a colored freedman from Trinidad who, together with hundreds of his followers attempted to set up a colony in eastern Venezuela. Between 1850 and 1854, fed-up with the lack of representative government in Trinidad, Dessources, at the head of an expedition of over 700 persons from all over the Caribbean, attempted to establish a colony called Numancia in the Upata territory near the Yuruari, one of the tributaries of the Orinoco. Dessources solicited and obtained the permission of a Venezuelan municipal authority but his problems included the intensification of anti-black racism in Venezuela and

nascent contention between the British government and that country over the disputed Venezuela-Guayana border area near to which his settlement was located. By 1854, his colonization experiment had failed. The majority of Numanicians had returned to Trinidad, disappointed and destitute.

Not much is known about Dessources' early life, but it seems certain that he was originally an emigrant from Santo Domingo who had entered Trinidad in 1804 and for decades had been resident on the island. There are indications that he was educated in France and might have been related to a family whose roots went back to St. Dominique at the time of the Afro-Jacobin revolution on that island. Evidence suggests also that later, in Trinidad, the Dessources became well-to-do colored planters in the southern part of the colony during the 1830s and that Numa himself had become wealthy planter. He and his family remained wealthy until the late 1840s when, among other things, depression in the British West Indian sugar industry intensified significantly.²

In 1848, he became owner and editor of a pro-black and colored newspaper, The Trinidadian.³ Using this newspaper as his medium, he had become a bitter critic of the British government and colonial officials. He was radical opposed to crown colony government and to Asian and other migrations to the island, and a most unrelenting campaigner against the post-slavery conditions facing blacks and coloreds in Trinidad. More than this, however, he was to emerge as the principal exponent of Afro-West Indian colonization of the Venezuelan "Wild Coast", a sparsely populated, vast expanse of no man's land on the Venezuela-British Guiana border. He was particularly interested in this area because of the discovery of gold there in 1849, and

also had designs on the gold field about which he could not let the Venezuelan authorities know.

But more than anything else he was concerned to lift his people up from what he saw as the debilitating nature of society, economy and politics in Trinidad, and in which, for Afro-descended people he felt there could be no hope for a future. In organizing his expeditions to Venezuela he made several trips to the eastern costal area. On the eve of his final departure, he addressed a huge farewell function in his honor with the following rational for leaving Trinidad and encouraging his followers to do so:

Emigrate we must, because we are that class of men without history, to whom providence had given the world for a home, wandering sons of an unhappy race....I shall go forth into a distant land, thereon to pitch the tent of our colonization, the cradle of our nationality... Happy will I be if indeed I succeed in procuring for our unfortunate brethren in an hospitable land, a wise liberty, a shelter, fertile soil, fruitful labour, a brighter horizon, in a word the possibility of happiness.”⁴

As a property owner, businessman and politician, Dessources was in many ways an accomplished individual. However, he was driven by a passionate desire to help his people. He was not alone in agitating vociferously on their behalf. Among his close colleagues was Thomas Hinde a colored schoolmaster was elected to the town council of Port of Spain in 1845 and who, during the late 1840s, became part of a protest movement against Asian immigration. There was also Henry Jobity, by then a former member

of the Royal Trinidad battalion, and who in the 1860s became a Stipendiary Magistrate and in consequence abandoned his political agitation, although still working in the interest of blacks. Another colored colleague William Herbert, an accountant, owner of a dry good store and proprietor and editor of two newspapers, the Trinidad Press and its successor, the Trinidad Colonist. Yet another member of the group was the colored counsel, Alexander Fitzjames, who was educated at the Middle Temple during the 1840s, and became famous as the defense counsel for the colored and blacks leaders of what became known as the Shaven-head riot, a protest against the shaving of the heads of Afro-descended prisoners at the Royal Gaol.

It is interesting to listen to Alexander Fitzjames in his spirited defense of one of the leaders of the Shaven-head riot. Firstly, he argued that the riot was caused by ill-treatment of persons committed to prison for petty misdemeanors and treated with disgrace. Secondly, that the laws of the colony were tyrannical and obnoxious. "You cannot be surprised," he contended, "that the people... would be dissatisfied" because they felt that the law was enacted by persons, disapproved of by them and not responsible to them."⁵ The law, he continued, was enacted by a Council of Government "notorious" to the people, and through which "things shameful and base" were done, all of which exemplified the proverb that "to one portion oppression is a dream, while the other know scarcely anything else... As long as this system continues to exist," he warned, "discontent will reign."⁶ Fitzjames' remarks reflected the existence then of a debate on the system of Crown Colony government which, introduced into the island since 1810, allowed mainly for the nomination of members of the legislature by the Governor and denied colored landowners electoral access to the corridors of

power. But the debate was also taking place against the background of unprecedented Afro-consciousness in the colony.

One picks up in all these individuals a tremendous display of Afro-consciousness and of the importance of sustained individual and group action. There was a consciousness of themselves and their race as victims, but also an unwillingness to be trapped into non-achievement through victimization. They were determined to achieve in spite of the difficulties, and were all highly educated, as well as owners of significant wealth and property.

There were several issues about which they commonly agitated. One was what they perceived of as the harmful effects of Indian immigration which, they argued, was crowding the labor market and the reducing the bargaining power of the blacks and coloreds on the island. Another involved their call for no taxation without representation. They also protested against the frustration of the black peasantry on the island through the failure of the colonial authorities to open up the crown lands, the difficult post emancipation living conditions and the unwillingness of the authorities to declare Emancipation Day a public holiday.

In many ways they were reflective of the rising but articulate class of black and colored professionals, and established the ideological foundation on which others belonging to their race were to build the reform movement which developed in the colony during the 1880s.

One fact that stands out is that in this period the same issues needed to be addressed. One picks this up in the issues raised by the spokesmen of this latter age, for example Henry Alcazar, who used his membership of the Legislative Council to oppose Indian immigration arguing, as Dessources had done before him, that the labor market was glutted and further immigrants would only depress wages and cause unemployment. Prudhomme David, who in 1904 became the first black unofficial member of the Legislative Council, presented similar arguments. Every year, in a minority of one, opposed the annual vote for immigration during the final years of the indentureship system. A similar orientation is found in the discourses and agitation of the Solicitor and Conveyancer Edgar Marese-Smith, and that of another colleague, M'zumbo Lazare, who, in addition to his professional and other accomplishments, devoted considerable energy and resources to encouraging others to appreciate African traditions and culture. That was something to which the imperial and colonial authorities had paid little or no attention.

Long after Dessources and his compatriots the struggle to rise up from slavery appeared to remain one which amounted to doing the best to achieve what was possible in an environment significantly oblivious to the concerns of freedmen in New World societies.

¹ <http://americanpoems.com/poets/Maya-Angelou/13470>.

² P. P. 18 Feb. 1823 "Paper Related to the Island of Trinidad". See Trinidad Royal Gazette (hereinafter, TRG) 10 Jan. 1837; TRG 23 and 27 Feb. 1838.

³ Riddel to Russell, 4 March 1853. Cf. TRG 9 July 1837.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ C.O. 295/170 Criminal Session 14 Dec. 1849.

⁶ Ibid.