

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
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**IN MEMORY OF MY ANCESTORS:  
Contributions of Afro-Jamaican Female Migrants  
In Port Limón, Costa Rica 1872-1890**

**Carmen Hutchinson Miller©  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Working paper number 8 began as a research paper by postgraduate student Carmen Hutchinson Miller as one of the academic requirements for her Master's degree in History at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, 2001. In that capacity she gained a postgraduate grant from the project of the Government of the Netherlands to support teaching and research at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies. One condition for the award of the grant was that the research would be published by the Centre. Ms Hutchinson Miller's paper makes a meaningful contribution to understanding women's economic and social contributions in the nineteenth century Hispanic Caribbean. While it provides insights in the lives and activities of these women it underscores the very migratory character of Caribbean societies. It is a useful beginning to an area of research that requires further investigation.

The paper makes visible the participation of Afro-Jamaican women during the critical economic period of the construction of the railroad in Costa Rica in the late nineteenth century. Hutchinson Miller's argument is that Caribbean and Costa Rican historians have paid insufficient attention to the social, cultural and economic contributions of those Afro-Jamaican women. She demonstrates that Afro-Jamaican women were not passive actors during the economic development of Port Limón, and that their active participation was on par with that of men. Although their productive, reproductive and organizational roles within the private sphere were not adequately recognized, these were as crucial as the men's input in contributing to the development of the society.

Ms Hutchinson Miller is an Afro-Costa Rican, a feminist, and a third generation descendant of Jamaicans who, as part of the Caribbean diaspora, migrated in the late nineteenth century to Port Limón, Costa Rica, for the construction of the railroad. Ms Hutchinson Miller intends to contribute scholarly work that deals with issues of Afro-Caribbean experiences and struggles from a historical and gender perspective. Ms Hutchinson Miller is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Cave Hill. The Centre is pleased to publish the work of a new generation of Caribbean scholars.

### **KEY WORDS**

Afro-Jamaican and Caribbean women, women and Caribbean history, racism, sexism, work, sexual division of labour, Afro-Caribbean women and migration, Central America and the Caribbean, Costa Rican women.

## INTRODUCTION

“History...tells me nothing that does not either vex  
or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars  
and pestilence in every page; the men all so good for nothing,  
and hardly any woman at all – it is very tiresome”

Jane Austen *Northanger Abby*

Women’s history has been regarded as a respected field within the academy for the last thirty years. Women, their lives, interests and struggles were not seen as tangent to ‘His’-story. While I agree that much has been done to give women agency within the historical field, I think it would be wise not to be too triumphant about this fact since men’s history has been the focus from time immemorial, therefore thirty years is not enough to position women as protagonists in history within an hegemonic, androcentric ideology.

The task of researching the historical experiences of all groups of women therefore becomes a very tiresome, grueling, frustrating, and often heartbreaking endeavor. It is often difficult to retrieve and reconstruct women’s lives and their stories. In many cases evidence of women’s experiences and contributions were not deemed important to be preserved.

The urge to write this paper comes from the commitment I feel as an Afro-Caribbean descendant to vindicate my ancestors, especially my ancestral grandmothers.

I want them to become visible and to be recognized as an important collective of courageous women who were willing to leave their homes and country in search of a better life. I want to show that they were able to improve conditions not only for themselves and their families but also for the country that received them. Afro-Jamaican, migrant women had to not only deal with the difficulties of being workers in a foreign country and finding themselves within a group with limited material resources. They also had to continue to grapple with the stereotypical roles assigned to them as women. These difficulties were compounded by overt and covert racism within this new country.

Afro-Jamaican women migrated to Costa Rica because of the economic development that the Central American country was starting to embark on during the late nineteenth century. It was one of the first options the country pursued as a way to become more self sufficient as a nation after its independence from Spain in 1821. The construction of the railroad materialized under the leadership of General Tomás Guardia as part of the country's quest for economic development. It was pivotal to Afro-Jamaicans migration to Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence of the recruitment of labourers for the construction of the railroad are found in the newspapers of the period where Costa Rican agents traveled to Jamaica and placed advertisements in the local newspapers offering jobs in the Central American country.

Costa Rican history of that period reflects the conventional history telling of hegemonic males and their achievements. Very little is said of the fact that Afro-Jamaican male migrants gave their labour, and in many cases their lives, for this Central American country's development. Far less is said about their female counterparts.

Given the insufficient attention that Caribbean and Costa Rican historians have paid to the social, cultural and economic contributions of the Afro-Jamaican migrant, women, I intend to demonstrate that Afro-Jamaican women were not passive actors during the economic development of Port Limón. I argue that their active participation was equal to that of the men although their productive, reproductive and organisational roles within the private sphere were not adequately recognized. Their input was as crucial as that of the men in contributing to the development of the society. As a descendant of Afro-Jamaican migrants it is my task not to perpetuate the deafening silence that has overshadowed these Afro-Jamaican women within nineteenth century Costa Rican history.

## **COSTA RICA IN THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

During the colonization period Costa Rica was very poor. During this period Central American countries did not represent the profit that Perú and Mexico did in terms of exploitation of riches, and the larger Amerindian labour force. Based on their size and

riches the Spanish Government grouped them under the Capitanía General.<sup>2</sup> As a legacy of this political strategy, Costa Rica found itself after independence at a disadvantage in terms of the financial resources to develop the country and its economy.

This state of unsettlement and reorganization created a lot of internal trouble for the new independent state. There were those who wanted to hold on to the old regime creating the political tensions that are inevitable in these cases. (Cruz 1985) makes a thorough analysis of the situation Costa Rica was in at the time of independence. He identified two kinds of politics and economy. He argues that there were two types of economy at the time of independence, one inherited from the colonial masters, which he identified as domestic and closed comparing it with the feudal system. Falling within this category and supporting the aristocratic ideas were the leaders of the provinces of Cartago and Heredia. The provinces of San José and Alajuela developed an open and urban economy and supported the liberal ideas backed by the new bourgeoisie.

This internal tension would have its implications in terms of how the country and its economy should be run, creating political unrest and coups from the time of independence until the ascension to power by a coup in 1870 by dictator General Tomás Guardia. He held power until 1882. In an indirect way Tomás Guardia included within Costa Rican history the large group of Afro-Caribbean people that would come and give a new face to what is Costa Rica today. He contributed to this historical event by his suggestion of building a railroad to the Atlantic in order to take the coffee to international markets.

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<sup>2</sup> This was a central government that was based in Guatemala during the period of colonization formed by Central American countries.

Before General Tomás Guardia ascension to power, previous political leaders recognized the importance of Costa Rica becoming part of the industrial age by constructing a railroad which was at the time, the sign of progress. However they were unable to build it at public expense and tried to find foreign investors, but this failed. Harpelle notes, "By the end of the 1860s, given the failure of private investors to realize the Costa Rican dream of a railway link to the Atlantic, the government recognized that it would have to undertake the project itself. As a result, in 1869 the government of Jesús de Jiménez approved and ratified the formation of the *Compañía del Ferrocarril de Costa Rica*" (Harpelle 2001:11). It was General Tomás Guardia in 1870 who managed to get financing from the British bankers. This was due to his liberal politics which also helped in establishing a less arbitrary system of governance.

General Tomás Guardia, saw cultivation of coffee as critical to the development of the Costa Rican economy. He believed this would enable the Costa Rican economy to become active in international trade. To encourage this, the Costa Rican government allowed England, Germany and Holland to invest foreign capital into the economy.

The construction of the railroad was going to be a big enterprise for the newly independent and inexperienced country in matters of economic development. This project was fueled by the liberal thinking of the period. Referring to the influence of Tomás Guardia, Chomsky (1996) notes, "He was right in line with the liberal dictators of the time, such as Justo Rufino Barrios in Guatemala and Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, who were presiding over the expropriation of communal lands, the capitalization of agriculture, and the development of export economies that would make Latin America the supplier of European and North American markets" (Chomsky 1996:17).

For this project, General Tomás Guardia hired the services of Henry Meiggs Keith to build the railroad. Such an endeavour, required a large labour force to cut through the

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dense mountains to open new roads that lead to the Atlantic. Most of this labour force came from the Caribbean especially from Jamaica. (Koch 1977, Meléndez and Duncan 1989, Purcell 1993, Murrillo, Chaverri 1995, Chomsky 1996, Harpelle 2001), examine this issue in detail.

## MIGRATION AND RACISM IN COSTA RICA

After aggressive marketing by the Costa Rican agents in the Caribbean countries, especially Jamaica, and the lifting of the legislation<sup>3</sup> in 1862 that prohibited the immigration of Blacks and Chinese, (Meléndez and Duncan 1989: 87) Afro Caribbean migration began. It marked the beginning of the history of the second wave of Black people to Costa Rica.<sup>4</sup> The first large contingent of Jamaicans arriving on the Costa Rican shores on December 20, 1872. It included 123 men and 3 women (Gaceta Oficial 1873:1). Between December 20, 1872 and July 28, 1874, there were 1,052 Caribbean immigrants, (Meléndez and Duncan 1989:72). Between 1900 and 1913 some twenty thousand Jamaicans, along with much smaller numbers of other West Indians, migrated to Costa Rica (Chomsky 1996:34).

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<sup>3</sup> This legislation known as 'La Ley de Bases y Colonización' (Law of Settlement and Colonization) was passed during the early stages of Costa Rican development as a sovereign nation. It tried to ensure the keeping out of invaders and make sure the establishment of a particular group that the country wanted to be identified with.

<sup>4</sup> The first wave of Africans within what become Costa Rican territory was during colonization, where they were brought as slaves.