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When Cuban Political Deportees Turned African Ethnographers

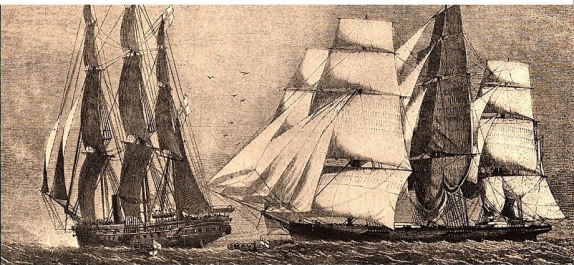
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When Cuban Political Deportees Turned African Ethnographers

Thursday, November 30, 2017 | 2:30 PM | FIU MMC | Graham Center 150

This presentation will address an array of links — trajectories, journeys and passages — between the islands of Cuba and Fernando Poo (between the West-central African Atlantic and the Caribbean), during the second half of the nineteenth century. These islands are neither points of ending nor points of origin; they circumscribe the Atlantic, an ocean which touches upon multiple insular and coastal experiences, narratives, histories and, in this case, ethnographies. By the 1850s, a number of West African localities had already begun to transcend their original function as a point of departure for the slave trade, becoming instead a site of exchange in the reverse direction. The island of Fernando Poo was integrated into the Spanish empire at the end of the eighteenth century. It began to serve in the second half of the nineteenth century as a destination for eastward movement, first for the emancipados and soon after (as a prison colony) for Cuban political deportees allegedly taking part in pro-independence insurrection movements.

This presentation will focus on processes of deportation, which affected thousands of Cubans of all social classes between the 1860s and the Spanish American War. Some deportees left detailed accounts of their experience in their African exile, turning into impromptu ethnographers of the African continent; in those accounts, Fernando Poo is always described in necrological tones, with a litany of metaphors of morbidity and mortality. Negatively compared with Havana, Fernando Poo evoked ideas of a return to the primitive and backwardness. Their colonial gaze on the local inhabitants is at least as intense as that of the Spanish colonial agents themselves.

Benita Sampedro Vizcaya is Associate Professor of Colonial Studies at Hofstra University, where she works closely with the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program and the African Studies Program. Her research interests focus on Spanish colonialism in both Africa and Latin America, revisiting their colonial links within and beyond the frame of the different imperial Atlantic networks. She has published on the politics and processes of decolonization and postcolonial legacies, colonial medicine, colonial archives, borders and ruins.

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