

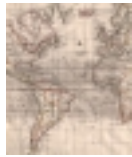
# Extinction: The Historical Trope of Anti-Indigeneity in the Caribbean

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## **Abstract:**

Several Caribbean territories have long been identified in the scholarly literature as unlikely to have retained any indigenous demographic or cultural presence stemming from either pre-colonial or early colonial times. These “unlikely places”, marked as they came to be for suffering from an absence of the autochthonous, included areas of the Greater Antilles such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and as far south as Trinidad and Tobago. On the other hand, concerted ethnohistoric, archaeological and ethnographic research conducted by several scholars over the past two decades has shown that the picture of the colonial and modern Caribbean presented by European scholars and chroniclers who became influential, was far from complete or accurate. Reflecting on the problems and questions raised by new historical interpretations provides the basis for this paper as I explore the implications of this increasingly contentious debate. I take a survey approach, reviewing some of the more noteworthy findings from the research of both colleagues and myself, spanning the territories mentioned above. Having provided an overview, I will argue that “extinction” was not much more than a trope used by colonialist historiographers (and their modern successors), a standard and routine motif that has been assigned and attached to indigeneity not just in the Caribbean, but across the Americas. Extinction is the concomitant of an assimilationist discourse that posits a universal path of progress and development, where tradition and its tribal upholders would be left behind in the wake of the advance of science, reason and material prosperity. Aside from the symbolic advantage conferred by the narrative of extinction, concrete political economic and material advantages were also to be had.

*“Paper genocide” practiced by historians ever since, [has] been just as cruel on my people. With the stroke of their pens, the legacy of my ancestors was wiped out.*

-----Jorge Estevez, Taíno, Dominican Republic, 2005.

**F**or those of us who were taught, as a matter of routine, that indigenous peoples of the Caribbean have been extinct for the past five centuries, developments during the last three decades would have struck us as very surprising. Communities, organizations, and individuals in the contemporary Caribbean and its diaspora are announcing their presence as

indigenous peoples, as Amerindians, as Caribs, or Taínos, even while the dominant historiography has been that these populations were wiped out, save for a *few* “culturally diluted” and “mixed race” remnants. Analytical problems begin with this very position. Does cultural survival have a number? Secondly, do miscegenation and acculturation disqualify indigeneity, rather than admit processes of transculturation in which indigenous peoples were and are present? Such questions, combined with increasing evidence from archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology and contemporary ethnography, can lead us to question the ways in which history has been written and the purposes that possibly motivate certain “accounts.”

With respect to historiography, the problem is not so much one of today’s self-identified Amerindian descendants simply fabricating a history that has no evidentiary support from the archives—quite the contrary, many of their spokespersons consult, possess and reproduce copies of these records—as much as it is a problem that a few select records and commentaries have been repeated to the point of becoming institutionalized. In extreme cases, select batches of archival documents, written by Europeans, are treated as more valid than testimonies by contemporary Amerindian descendants. Extinction thus becomes fact, and survival becomes fraud, at least in some of the more polemical exchanges. Yet, scholars increasingly realize that uncritical reliance on archival records and early chronicles is fraught with problems. First, early colonial documents and chronicles are often contradictory. Second, official documents were written for select purposes and audiences, and were selective and partial in what they chose to record. Third, the documentary record is incomplete, and in some cases is known to have diminished with time through various processes of decay, disorganization and neglect. Fourth, early chronicles and later travel writings often seem written with the intent of producing stories that were partially predetermined by the biases and preferences of the home audience, thus basing themselves more on established and recognizable narrative structures than local “ethnographic facts.” The extinction theme became prominent in the writings about certain Caribbean territories because, in part, indigenous populations have been defined in terms of racial or cultural purity, where change or transculturation is tantamount to loss. “Extinction” has also been a useful argument that could suit a wide variety of purposes. Finally, “extinction,” viewed by more modern writers, could fit into certain prominent European ways for speaking about non-European others.

Research by ethnohistorians and ethnographers such as Jose Barreiro and Lynne Guitar, by archaeologists such as Samuel Wilson, Kathleen Deagan and William Keegan, and by population geneticists such as Juan Carlos Martínez Cruzado, present us with a picture of the Greater Antilles in the colonial and contemporary periods that is substantially different from past accounts. The primary purpose of this paper is to attempt a synthetic survey of some of the more noteworthy findings in recent research. I will add complementary material from my own research on the Caribs of Trinidad, outlining the interests that were vested in assertions of extinction contra testimonies and documentations of survival. The results of this survey of research show, amongst many things, indigenous survival as perceived in two distinct forms: biological and cultural—that is, evidence of a continuing presence of many persons of indigenous ancestry, resulting from DNA surveys in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, as well as ethnographies of contemporary indigenous communities, and an appreciation of indigenous cultural practices that have diffused throughout the life ways of rural populations in the larger Caribbean territories.

My argument here is that the extinction theme has become part of a familiar story, an ideological narrative of Western progress, of traditions succumbing to modernity, of “weaker” peoples giving way to “stronger” ones, of sloth giving way to industry. We are therefore dealing with a particular theory of history, with its own selection of suitable facts, rather than an accurate and impartial record of events. Besides that, it has been a useful theory of history, when viewed

in the context of various political and economic projects characteristic of modernization in the Atlantic World. Extinction, a theme emerging from the intertwining of numerous accounts, reports, chronicles, essays and travel writings, can be viewed as having led to the creation of a convenient historical trope. The trope of the vanishing Indian was often consciously used by colonialist historiographers (and somewhat less so by their modern successors), as a standard and routine motif that has been assigned and attached to indigeneity not just in the Caribbean, but across the Americas, a recurring theme of the ever-disappearing Amerindian that could serve a range of sometimes contradictory interests, whether symbolic or material, or both.

### THE EXTINCTION THEME IN THE CARIBBEAN

Recognizing Caribbean indigeneity can challenge some of the longest held assumptions of the nature of the Caribbean and its role in Atlantic World history. The dominant historiography of the Caribbean has tended to emphasize novelty over cultural persistence, highlighting the character of the region as being at the forefront of modernity, present at the foundation of the world capitalist system, a zone that is largely the creation of global forces such as industrial sugar production, international commerce, colonial governance, and the transplantation of peoples from across the planet. I would *not* argue that this description is fundamentally flawed either. Instead, my contention, and that of others, is that as complex the Caribbean is, this particular picture of complexity is still too simple, with outcomes that seem almost predictable, reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural evolutionism. Established and mainstream theories of colonialism, creolization and nationalism in the region have tended to base themselves on this still-too-simple picture of Caribbean complexity.

We must begin by remembering that several Caribbean territories have long been identified in the scholarly and popular literature as unlikely to retain any indigenous demographic or cultural presence stemming from either pre-colonial or early colonial times. Caribbean historian Franklin Knight, for example, wrote of the “rapid disappearance of the Arawakan population during the first century of Spanish colonization” given that “the arrival of the three caravels from Spain in 1492 meant *inexorable doom*” (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> Such themes of inevitability appear in much of the modern historical literature of the early colonial Caribbean, a fact that is not accidental in my view. Gordon Lewis, another prominent Caribbean historian, wrote similarly of the disappearance of indigenous cultures, leaving a few scattered artifacts at best.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, one of David Lowenthal’s influential history texts noted that in the wider Caribbean today, “however defined, only about 50,000 Amerindians inhabit the West Indian culture realm, a small fraction of the one or two million living there at the time of Columbus,” this despite the fact that not even in the present, let alone the past, are such numbers indisputable or reliable. Moreover, in Lowenthal’s estimation, “the surviving remnants are dwindling, socially demoralized, progressively less Indian in character.” Lowenthal pointed out that, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sources claim that the Arawaks were all extinct and that the few remaining de-indigenized Caribs were in a state of cultural and ethnic deterioration.<sup>3</sup> A seminal text on Trinidad’s aboriginal history also claimed that “few if any” indigenous inhabitants remain in Trinidad.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Trinidadian historians claim that by 1797 all of Trinidad’s Indian villages had virtually “disappeared;” moreover, isolated Indians who had not been brought under colonial control “must have been” an insignificant minority that also “disappeared”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 393.

<sup>3</sup> David Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 31, 32, 179.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad* (London: British Academic Press, 1976), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 7, 16, 20, 21.

Rarely does one encounter any degree of critical investigation into the evidentiary bases for assertions of disappearance, nor a self-critical examination of the logical and conceptual bases for arguments of extinction. What we tend to have, instead, are relatively facile assertions, offered as if there could be no debate or alternatives. The taken for granted nature of allegations of extinction deserves greater scrutiny. I would agree that sometimes one does see indigenous peoples vanish, abruptly and suddenly, from the documentary record. An example of that would be how persons of Indian birth were marked as such in the baptismal registers of the Mission of Santa Rosa in Arima, Trinidad, a practice that ceased in the 1840s. Taken at face value, yes, Amerindians did indeed “disappear,” at least from records for that specific period (of course they “reappear” in other records not too long afterwards). Could they have just totally vanished overnight in reality? It hardly seems credible. One of the problems with mainstream accounts of cultural processes involving indigenous peoples, is that they do not make explicit their assumptions about those processes, about how cultures can simply and seemingly “die,” or how people who never lost any war, never signed any treaty, and never fled, can just evaporate. This strains credulity especially in the case of Trinidad, where for millennia the island was tightly integrated with the nearby mainland and the Lesser Antilles, serving as a base for at least a dozen different indigenous ethnic groups and several indigenous languages.<sup>6</sup>

The extinction theme is, however, especially prominent in the case of the Spanish colonized Greater Antilles (which includes territories today known as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica amongst others). These “unlikely places”, marked as they came to be for suffering from an absence of the autochthonous, also included a range of islands, to greater or lesser degrees of presumed extinction, as far south as Trinidad and Tobago. Having said that, it is noteworthy that while all indigenous peoples in the region were exposed to European diseases, warfare, and coerced labor, the narrative of extinction is almost always applied with especial emphasis to Spanish territories such as Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola—as if diseases *there* were more potent than elsewhere. Given the marginality of these territories in Spanish colonial political economy, when compared to Mexico and Peru, and given the much more limited Spanish presence in these Caribbean colonies, it is not surprising that some scholars have decided to take another look at indigenous peoples in the colonial Caribbean, presenting us in the process with important alternative evidence and explanations.

## **SURVIVALS IN THE GREATER ANTILLES**

### ***Cuba***

For at least over a century, most Cuban academics have assumed or asserted that the Taíno suffered extinction from as early as 1700. Much of the available research on contemporary indigenous survival in Cuba, especially in eastern Cuba, stems from the work of José Barreiro which includes both an ethnographic element as well as a review of published, but often

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see: Neil L. Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana, 1498-1820* (Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1988); Pierre-Gustave-Louis Borde, *The History of the Island of Trinidad under the Spanish Government, Second Part (1498-1622)* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie, Libraires-Editeurs, 1876); and Alfredo E. Figueredo and Stephen D. Glazier, “A Revised Aboriginal Ethnohistory of Trinidad (1978)”, in *Earliest Hispanic/Native American Interactions in the Caribbean*, ed. William F. Keegan (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 237-240. Extensive information on the Warao presence in Trinidad, and the symbolic meanings Trinidadian natural landmarks in Warao cosmology can be found in Michele Goldwasser, “Remembrances of the Warao: the Miraculous Statue of Siparia, Trinidad,” *Antropologica*, 1994-96, 843-42, and in *The Rainbow Madonna of Trinidad: A Study in the Dynamics of Belief in Trinidadian Religious Life*. (Ph.D. diss. University of California at Los Angeles, 1996). The close integration of Trinidad and Venezuela, on various levels, from pre-colonial times through the Spanish colonial period can also be found in Jesse A. Noel, *Provincia de Venezuela: Historia de la administración española de Trinidad* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1972).

overlooked, historical accounts as well as municipal records.<sup>7</sup> Barreiro has argued that there is strong testimonial evidence of the existence of a Cuban Amerindian population from the Yateras municipality, and other parts of the Sierra Maestra mountains, remnants of Cuban villages that were Indian settlements during the conquest. The towns of Caridad de los Indios and La Escondida are located on a mountain range that has been home to a native population for generations since the Spanish conquest, Barreiro explains.<sup>8</sup> The “Yateras Indians,” as Barreiro refers to them, owe their survival in part to their relative geographic isolation, a characteristic of indigenous cultural survival that appears in other Caribbean historiographies of both the past and present.

Barreiro does not argue that the native population survived completely unchanged and separate from the rest of Cuba. Indeed, few or no contemporary researchers of indigenous cultural survival in the Caribbean rely on outmoded stereotypes of “pure” peoples living in “pristine” seclusion. Instead they tend to find indigenous survivals through forms of transculturation or creolization. The population that Barreiro is investigating is a rural and miscegenated population referred to in Cuba as *guajiros* (similar to *jibaros* in Puerto Rico), a word that is itself of Amerindian origins from the South American mainland.<sup>9</sup> However, as Cuban historian Pichardo Moya observed, the Amerindian background of this peasant population was often simply denied.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as the contemporary Cuban historian, Maria Nelsa Trincado has argued: “During nearly 200 years (16th and 17th centuries)...the aboriginal population was, to a great extent, in the majority and there is clear evidence that it imposed itself, in many aspects of the daily life, upon the Spaniards and the Cuban black people (African or Creole, enslaved or freed) in their precarious first moments in the island.”<sup>11</sup>

Searching through an extensive range of parochial and municipal records, and a steady if somewhat unnoticed string of authors and researchers from the 1600s to the present, Barreiro finds documentation of the existence of an Amerindian-descended population in eastern Cuba, documentation that has not previously received prominent attention. For example, Barreiro directs our attention to the work of Pichardo Moya who, referring to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, writes of “Indian towns (pueblos de indios)...in Ovejas, Guanabacoa, Jiguaní, Caney, Tarraco, Yateras, Caujeri, Yara, Dos Brazos, Yaguaramas, and other places.” Pichardo Moya cites a town official at a government house in the 1840s who wrote that “in a few hours three and four hundred Indians can gather...on Sundays they hear Mass, and they have their original dances.”<sup>12</sup> Referring

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<sup>7</sup> Among his more recent work, see: Jose Barreiro, *Panchito: cacique de montaña* (Santiago de Cuba: Ediciones Catedral, 2001); “Survival Stories”, in A. Chomski, B. Carr & P. M. Smorkaloff (Eds.), *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (pp. 28-36). Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28-36; “Beyond the Myth of Extinction: The Hatuey Regiment.” *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology*, retrieved June 8, 2005, from <http://www.kacike.org/Barreiro.html>; and, “Taíno Survivals: Cacique Panchito, Caridad de los Indios, Cuba”, in *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival*, ed. Maximilian C. Forte (New York: Peter Lang, In Press).

<sup>8</sup> Barreiro, “Taino Survivals”, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Barreiro does an excellent job of rounding up sources that affirm the Amerindian roots of the term “guajiro”. He notes Irving Rouse wrote that, “several [early contact] sources mention a term guajiro.’ This may have applied to the common people” (Irving Rouse, “Circum-Caribbean Tribes,” *Handbook of North American Indians*, Bulletin 143, 1948, 4, 530). Noeli Pocaterra, an Arawak-speaking Wayuu Tiger clan mother from Venezuela, communicating with Barreiro in 1996, reported that in her Wayuu language “waxiri or waxeri” were Hispanicized to *guajiro* in Venezuela (as in Cuba), and means “a headman of his family line or man that heads a house.” Arrom reported that the term guajiro was “from the Taíno”, for “our countryman” (Juan Jose Arrom, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians: Fray Ramón Pané* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1999]).

<sup>10</sup> F. Pichardo Moya, *Los indios de Cuba en sus tiempos históricos* (Havana: Imprenta Editorial Siglo XX, 1945).

<sup>11</sup> Maria Nelson Trincado, “El Aborigen y la formación de la nacionalidad Cubana,” *El Caribe Arqueológico*, 1, (1999): 100.

<sup>12</sup> Pichardo Moya, *Los indios de Cuba* quoted in Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 36.

to the work of Cuban scholars José Antonio García and Daisy Fariñas, in their book on Cuban indigenous survivals, Barreiro notes that they make a strong case of how the form of these early *areitos* (dances) was transformed into a contemporary Cuban spiritist cult, *Danza del Cordón* (“dance of the chord”), a ceremony still practiced in the eastern mountains and other parts of Cuba.<sup>13</sup> Upon examining court records, Barreiro found that in 1846 Indian families of El Caney (near Santiago) were driven from their lands while the Spanish “Audiencia” in Camagüey declared that the Indian community no longer existed. It seems that this was done in order to clear title to the lands in question, especially as several documents detail cases of Indians claiming lands before the Audiencias.<sup>14</sup> This case is virtually identical to extinction arguments advanced in Trinidad at almost precisely the same time, where indigenous lands in Arima, inalienable under the law, were expropriated by a variety of means, in spite of a continuing Amerindian presence noted by parish priests. As late as three decades after these acts of expropriation, a parish priest in Arima referred to remaining Amerindians in the region launching a petition to send to the governor, which the priest endorsed.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, Barreiro has done a very effective job of marshalling documents and published accounts that point to the existence of surviving indigenous communities in eastern Cuba, especially during the 1700s and 1800s, a period by which the mainstream accounts insisted that Indians had become extinct. If one wishes to continue insisting on extinction, then the argument will now have to be substantially more complicated. What Barreiro has also uncovered are several published accounts written by visitors to eastern Cuba during the early 1900s, thus providing us with an historical bridge spanning three centuries of indigenous presence.

With reference to these visitor reports written in the early 1900s, Barreiro speaks of Stewart Cullin and Mark Harrington, who explored the eastern mountains in Yateras and Baracoa and who both commented, according to the racial and anthropometric conventions of the time, on substantial Indian survival among both “full-blood” and “mixed” families, also noting “slight” cultural practices.<sup>16</sup> In the same region, (La Guira and Dos Brazos), archaeologist Irving Rouse also documented Indian population survivals.<sup>17</sup> In the 1940s, Cuban geographer Antonio Núñez Jiménez, wrote of his encounters with Taíno descendant families in the eastern Sierras. He estimated the population of aboriginal roots in the Pico Turquino region (not Yateras) at about 3,000.<sup>18</sup> Rivero de la Calle and Dacal estimated the total population of indigenous descent just in the area of Yateras/Caridad de los Indios at about 1,000 persons, or over one hundred families.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, some of the important findings in Barreiro’s most recent work stem from his analysis of the composition of “the Hatuey Regiment,” an armed force that fought the Spanish during the war for independence. He argues that, “the evidence is irrefutable that four centuries after the supposed ‘extinction’ of Cuban Indians, in a regiment made up of people from the Yateras Valley of Guantanamo, in eastern Cuba, Cuban Indian descendants—from a Taíno, or

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<sup>13</sup> José Antonio García Molina, Daisy Fariñas Gutiérrez, and M. Garrido Mazorra, *Huellas vivas del Indocubano*. (Toronto: Lugus Libros, 1998), quoted in Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 36.

<sup>14</sup> Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 36.

<sup>15</sup> See Maximilian Forte, “How the Amerindians of Arima Lost their Lands,” report commissioned by the Santa Rosa Carib Community, 2003. Available at: <http://www.kacike.org/srcc/landreport.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart Cullin, “The Indians of Cuba,” *Bulletin of the Free Museum of Science and Art*, University of Pennsylvania, 3 (4), (1902): 185-226, and Mark Harrington, *Cuba before Columbus*, Vols. 1 & 2 (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1921), in Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 36.

<sup>17</sup> Rouse, “Circum-Caribbean Tribes,” 519.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *El pico turquino, exploración y estudio* (Havana: Sociedad Espeleológica de Cuba, 1945), 37 quoted in Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 37.

<sup>19</sup> Manuel Rivero de la Calle, and R. Dacal Mouré, *Archeología aborigen de Cuba* (Havana: Gente Nueva, 1978) quoted in Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 39.

insular Arawak region—fought the Spanish colonial government under the famous Cuban patriot, Major General Antonio Maceo.”<sup>20</sup>

### *From Hispaniola to the Dominican Republic*

“It was on Hispaniola that the myth of Taíno extinction began.”<sup>21</sup> The myth’s most prevalent origin, as argued by Lynne Guitar (historian), Pedro Ferbel (archaeologist) and Jorge Estevez (Taíno), was the campaign of the Dominican friars, led by Bartolomé de las Casas, to abolish the *encomienda* system and replace it with a mission system, based on the over-emphasized argument that the indigenous population was being rapidly exterminated from hard labor and disease.<sup>22</sup> While Guitar, Ferbel and Estevez do not deny that the Taínos suffered serious population loss, they do contest exaggerated notions of total extinction. As they put it, “an 80-90% loss is a significant and horrifying loss. It is so horrifying that it obscures the fact that 10-20% of the Taíno survived.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, several years after Columbus’ arrival, at a time when many scholars and other writers assumed the Taíno had already succumbed to extinction, archaeologist William Keegan notes “in 1499, Columbus felt confident in suggesting the sale of [Taíno] slaves as a means of resurrecting the failing economy.”<sup>24</sup>

Guitar, Ferbel and Estevez have collaborated in producing a detailed historical and contemporary account of the diverse rationales behind proclamations of Taíno extinction. Allegations of Taíno extinction could serve multiple purposes, whether in serving those colonists who benefited from the importation of African slaves, or in more modern contexts where the extinction myth could suit national and class interests.<sup>25</sup> The Dominican nation can thus cast itself as one having transcended Amerindian backwardness, in ways that I found resonate with some writings by nationalist historians in modern Trinidad.

The work of these authors has, in part, focused on some of the more glaring deficiencies of the historical documentation that has hitherto been advanced as evidentiary support for allegations of Taíno extinction. Guitar et al argue that, “beyond issues of intentional misrepresentation and selective accounting, Spanish texts are fraught with cultural biases that cloud the distinction between accuracy and invention. The biases are compounded during the processes of transcription and translation, especially of archaic documents. Finally, Spanish texts must be interpreted within their social context as part of a larger discourse of colonial policy, not merely as objective descriptions.”<sup>26</sup> Their approach is one that evaluates texts against other documents and against archaeological, linguistic, geographical, and ethnographic evidence to provide a greater measure of consistency and veracity. They seek to situate interpretation according to the social and political positions of the authors and translators, as well as the intended audience of each document. In the process, they frequently find themselves arguing against authors who tend to treat documents as uncontested facts thus exercising little in the way of source criticism or methodological triangulation. What is especially interesting, not to mention paradoxical, is that Guitar et al sometimes use many of the same documents that other historians have used to prove Taíno extinction, such as census records.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Barreiro, “Taino Survivals,” 40. See his article on the same subject: Barreiro, “Beyond the Myth of Extinction.”

<sup>21</sup> Lynne Guitar, Pedro Ferbel, and Jorge Estevez, “*Ocama-Daca Taíno* (Hear me, I Am Taíno): Taíno Survival on Hispaniola, Focusing on the Dominican Republic,” in *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival*, ed. Maximilian C. Forte (New York: Peter Lang, In Press), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 55.

<sup>23</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 65.

<sup>24</sup> William F. Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” *Archaeology* January/February (1992), 51-56.

<sup>25</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 55.

<sup>26</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 59.

<sup>27</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 60.

Starting with demography, Guitar et al note that while there has been extensive controversy about Taíno demographics,<sup>28</sup> the general consensus today is that there were several million of them on Hispaniola in the 1490s. They also indicate that “Spaniards were outnumbered by at least five to one by Amerindians, Africans, and mixed-blood ‘others’ long after the natives were supposed to have disappeared,” and, this is critical, “long before most of the African slaves arrived.”<sup>29</sup> The category of “others” is a word used frequently in the island’s early censuses. The terms “mestizo” and “mulatto” did not appear in colonial census records until the 1580s, Guitar et al explain, and thus the “others” category could also indicate the extent of Taíno intermarriage with other groups and possible cultural diffusion as a result. Compared to the number of Taíno on Hispaniola, very few Spaniards came, and those who did were overwhelmingly male.<sup>30</sup> Unions between Spanish males and Taíno females were thus the norm, and are a further indication, quite clearly, that there were Taínos to “marry” (formally or otherwise). Referring to the work of Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons, Guitar et al note that intermarriage between Spaniards and Taíno women is clearly substantiated by the *Repartimiento* Census of 1514, which shows that 40% of Spanish men on the island had Indian wives or concubines.<sup>31</sup> Archbishop Alonso de Avila of Santo Domingo ordered a census taken in 1533. In his census, Avila reported 1,525 “others”—820 more than in the 1530 census, Guitar et al explain. In letters that accompanied his census, as uncovered by Lynne Guitar, he wrote that these unspecified persons included “some Spaniards, Africans, and *indios*.” He admitted that there were other persons, too, who were *not* included in the census—they “were mostly *indios*.”<sup>32</sup> Also of considerable interest is the fact that 12 years after Avila’s census, in a report from the island’s Governor Alonso de Fuenmayor to Emperor Charles, the headcount for one plantation alone had risen from 700 Africans to 962, and from 200 *indios* to 1,212.<sup>33</sup> As late as 1545, Africans only outnumbered the indigenous workforce on nine of the 29 plantations in the census for that year; Fuenmayor enumerated more than 5,000 *indios*.<sup>34</sup> According to one estimate in 1777 of the population of the Spanish part of Hispaniola, the total population was 400,000. Of that number, mestizos of “white and Indian race” and mestizos of “black and Indian race” together accounted for 160,000 people.<sup>35</sup>

Flight, which we have to recognize as one possible response to situations of conquest that has been recorded elsewhere, will also do considerable damage to the credibility of any indigenous headcounts conducted by sometimes overwhelmed and understaffed colonial administrations. The censuses tend to account only for those Taíno who stayed on the Spaniards’ *encomiendas*.<sup>36</sup> Here Guitar et al are able to read colonial documents and censuses critically, finding the contradictions and admissions that indicate an awareness of escaped Indians beyond the perimeters of colonial control, and hence, beyond any formal count that would be needed to convincingly substantiate the extinction thesis. The 1514 *Repartimiento*, or re-division of the

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<sup>28</sup> See J. Verano, and D. Ubelaker, (Eds) *Disease and demography in the Americas* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 62.

<sup>30</sup> See P. Boyd-Bowman, *Patterns of Spanish immigration to the New World (1493-1580)* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York, 1973), and, “Patterns of Spanish Emigration to the Indies until 1600,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 56(4), (1976): 580-604, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 60.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Moya Pons, “The Politics of Forced Indian labor in La Hispaniola, 1493-1520,” *Antiquity*, 66 (1992): 135, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 61.

<sup>32</sup> Archivo General de Indias, Justicia 12, 149, ff10v-15, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 67-68)

<sup>33</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 68.

<sup>34</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 68.

<sup>35</sup> Jose Alvarez de Peralta in *Relaciones geográficas de Santo Domingo*, ed. Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi (Santo Domingo: Editora del Caribe, 1970), 162.

<sup>36</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 66.

remaining 26,189 “commended” Indians, is often used to confirm that the Taíno were nearly extinct by then, according to Guitar et al. Yet, what is overlooked is that the Taíno had been fleeing from the Spaniards for more than two decades since 1492. Governor Nicolás de Ovando himself wrote, as reflected in a 1503 royal report, that Taíno and Africans frequently ran away together, using the *indios*’ knowledge of the countryside to survive and to evade the Spanish patrols.<sup>37</sup>

Many Taínos fled to other lands or hid in isolated *cimarrón* (runaway or Maroon) communities far from the Spanish towns and plantations, often accompanied by runaway African slaves. In other cases, Guitar notes, from the very beginning of Spanish colonization of the island, Taínos lived with or near Spaniards and their African slaves, starting a process of “transculturation” that gave rise to a new creole culture (a topic I shall address shortly).<sup>38</sup>

Recognition of the presence of these indigenous and African *cimarrones* can be found in several instances, in addition to the governor’s report mentioned above. Some Spaniards on Hispaniola testified that growing numbers of *indios cimarrones* had the island “in the grip of such terror” that no one wanted to leave the Capital.<sup>39</sup> In one of dozens of court testimonies that mention runaways, a Spanish colonialist told the Jeronymite friars in 1517 that he had personally observed many *indios* fleeing to the mountains.<sup>40</sup> Peter Martyr confirmed that, “many of the *indios*, when their *caciques* call them...flee to the forests and mountains...hiding themselves so as not to suffer from that work” assigned to them by their Spanish *encomenderos*.<sup>41</sup> “[B]oth the negroes and the Indians have fled to the mountains,” testified Juan de Ampies in 1517.<sup>42</sup>

Rural areas of Hispaniola, as we saw in the case of Cuba, afforded surviving indigenous communities the limited protection that marginalization from centers of colonial power can offer. Captain Francisco de Barrionuevo, who negotiated the peace treaty with the rebel Taíno cacique Enriquillo in 1534, observed that in the island’s rural regions, “there are many...sons of Spaniards and *indias*, who generally are born on the small farms and depopulated towns.”<sup>43</sup> Enriquillo’s defeat of Spanish forces in a war lasting 14 years, also indicates the strength of remaining Taíno numbers in Hispaniola. Enriquillo was given land for his people in the area known as Boya. Another cacique, Murcio also rebelled against the Spanish and fought for 25 years until 1545 and was also given lands for his people.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence of the New Laws

<sup>37</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 65.

<sup>38</sup> Lynne Guitar, “*Criollos*: The birth of a dynamic new Indo-Afro-European people and culture on Hispaniola,” *Kacike: Journal of Caribbean Amerindian history and anthropology*, retrieved July 10, 2002, from <http://www.kacike.org/LynneGuitar.html>; Lynne Guitar, “*Criollos*: El nacimiento de la identidad Americana y de la cultura Americana en la Hispaniola,” *Boletín del Museo del Hombre Dominicano*, 34, (2003): 111-129; Manuel García Arévalo, *Santo Domingo en la ocasión del quinto centenario* (Santo Domingo: Colección del Quinto Centenario, 1992); Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 61.

<sup>39</sup> R. Martí, *Santo Domingo en los manuscritos de Juan Bautista Muñoz* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Fundación García-Arévalo, 1981), 359-360; C. Herrera Cabral, *Colección César Herrera, Junta de Procuradores, 1518-1545*, Vol. I. (Santo Domingo: Patronato de la Ciudad de Santo Domingo, 1995), 229-281; Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 65.

<sup>40</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 65.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Martyr D’Anghiera, *Pedro Martir de Angleria, Primer cronista de Indias: Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* (Santo Domingo: Sociedad Dominicana de Bibliófilos, 1989), Fourth Decade, Book 10, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 66.

<sup>42</sup> AGI, Indiferente General 1624; text available in C. Herrera Cabral, *Colección César Herrera*, and E. Rodríguez Demorizi, *Los dominicos de la Isla Española* (Santo Domingo: Editora del Caribe, 1971), 273-354, quoted in Guitar, “*Criollos*,” 3.

<sup>43</sup> Guitar, “*Criollos*,” 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Audiencia de Santo Domingo 77, Polemica de Enriquillo, 487-488 quoted in Lynne Guitar, *Cultural Genesis: Relationships between Indians, Africans and Spaniards in Rural Hispaniola in the First Half of the Sixteenth Century*, PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1998.

(1542) that gave aboriginal people greater freedom, some small villages were created in which surviving groups of Taínos and their descendants resided. Such is the case of the towns of Boya and Banica in the Dominican Republic (and also in Guanabacoa, Cuba).<sup>45</sup> By 1895, Frederick Ober commented, “there are still half breed Indians living in the town of Boya, Dominican Republic,” the area that had been secured by the rebel Enriquillo.<sup>46</sup>

Spanish knowledge of the facts of indigenous demography was, by their own admission, often incomplete. For example, a royal advisory dated July 31, 1556, reported that in 1555 a Spanish patrol discovered four entire towns “full of *indios* about which no one previously knew.”<sup>47</sup>

Guitar et al also point us to the risk of envisioning Spanish colonialism as an unstoppable juggernaut that simply ran over and crushed all opposition. Hispaniola, they remind us, was quickly peripheralized within the Spanish Atlantic world, along with territories such as Jamaica and Trinidad. A large part of Hispaniola’s territory simply had no Spanish presence, except for occasional military patrols. Domination became even more difficult by the 1510s, Guitar et al argue, when the Spanish population, never large to begin with, began to decrease. Spaniards left Hispaniola in large numbers seeking their fortunes in other parts of the Caribbean, and later in Mexico and Peru.<sup>48</sup> According to archaeologist William Keegan, “between 1493 and 1500 the Spanish colony on Hispaniola suffered more defeats than successes.”<sup>49</sup> Keegan also notes that Spanish colonial settlements on the island tended to be tiny, with only 300 Spaniards until 1502, when 2,500 more came, of which 1,000 soon died. In the meantime, Taíno work gangs in the gold mines suffered a death rate of 25% to 30%, a profound loss but one far from what is implied by the term extinction.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of either extinction or seamless continuity, Guitar et al argue that the reality is that over the years, a poor but landed peasantry developed from the original group of Taíno, Africans and Europeans, and through which indigenous customs and practices have been diffused.<sup>51</sup> Where Spaniards formed unions with Taínos, the lives of these mixed couples and their children remained quite indigenous, an argument advanced in the work of archaeologist Kathleen Deagan.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the inevitable transculturation that occurs with so-called mixed marriages, Guitar et al speak of indigenous customs finding a new life within broadly compatible Spanish customs. For example, the Spanish custom of *compadrazgo* (godparenting), principally at baptism, was utilized by indigenous peoples across the Americas to replace their own systems of fictive kinship, significantly changing the Spanish system in the process.<sup>53</sup> In her excavations of the La Isabela site, the first town established by Columbus in Hispaniola, Kathleen Deagan finds that within five years of its establishment, European ceramics were replaced by local

<sup>45</sup> Sebastian Robiou Lamarche, *Tainos and Caribs, the Aboriginal Cultures of the Antilles* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial Punto y Coma, 2003), 244.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Albion Ober, “Aborigines of the West Indies”, *Proceedings of the American Antiquity Society* (1895), 289.

<sup>47</sup> CDIU, *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas en Ultramar*, Vol. 18 (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1885-1932), 10, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 70.

<sup>48</sup> Archivo General de India, Patronato Real 172, R35, quoted in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 63.

<sup>49</sup> Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>50</sup> Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>51</sup> Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 55.

<sup>52</sup> See Kathleen Deagan, “Spanish-Indian Interaction in Sixteenth-Century Florida and Hispaniola,” in *Cultures in Contact: The Impact of European Contacts on Native American Cultural Institutions* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press).

<sup>53</sup> G. M. Foster, “Cofradía and Compadrazgo in Spain and Spanish America,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 9(1), (1953): 1-28, cited in Guitar, et al., “*Ocama-Daca Taíno*,” 62.

earthenware pots, and foods and food preparation show a transition from European grains and the *morteros* used to grind them to corn and cassava and the *manos*, metates, and griddles that the Taíno used to prepare these foods. According to Deagan, changes in cuisine significantly influenced the process of Spanish indigenization.<sup>54</sup> What occurred on Hispaniola was not extinction, nor just “Hispanization”, but also “indigenization.” Referring to the work of Manuel García-Arévalo, a leading Dominican scholar, Keegan notes the wattle-and-daub or wood-and-thatch structure (“bohío”), cultigens (cassava, corn, sweet potato), words (hammock, canoe, barbecue, hurricane), and the geographical names as lasting contributions of the Taíno.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Puerto Rico***

Puerto Rico, like Cuba and Hispaniola, has commonly been reputed to be another place where the native population was totally eradicated as a result of Spanish conquest. Indeed, in 1543 the Bishop of San Juan reported to the crown that there were but 60 native Indians remaining in the entire island of Puerto Rico. Yet half a century later, different reports surfaced. When the Earl of Cumberland, who had captured San Juan, fled the island, the King of Spain sent an armada commanded by General Don Francisco Coloma to re-conquer the colony in 1599. Given previous accounts, he was surprised to find the city of San Juan inhabited almost entirely by Indians.<sup>56</sup> According to historian Salvador Brau, the censuses of 1777 and 1787 recorded the existence of some 2,000 Amerindians in the areas of Indiera Alta, Indiera Baja and Indiera Fría. These were descendants of a group of Taínos who, in 1570, decided to seclude themselves in the mountainous regions of central Puerto Rico in order to protect themselves from Spanish colonization.<sup>57</sup> Once again, censuses provide us with a picture painted in contradiction, some of them irreconcilable as they suggest that a large population of indigenous people could disappear overnight (and sometimes suddenly reappear stronger than ever). For example, in the 1787 census under Governor Toribio Montes, over 2,300 “pure Indians” are listed as living in the Central Cordillera—yet in the census of 1800, there are no categories for Indians or mixed blood Indians. What does appear in place of Indians are Freemen of color or “pardo”.<sup>58</sup> It seems reasonable to suggest that, as in Hispaniola, indigenous populations and cultural practices survived through mixing with Africans and Europeans, and through processes of flight to more remote locations. According to Carol Jopling, the Taínos “withdrew into the mountains, later intermarrying with the escaped black slaves and deserting Spanish soldiers. They later became the rural proletariat. Indeed, their imprint is still visible in the faces and stature of many Puerto Ricans as well as in the Island’s language.”<sup>59</sup>

One of the more noteworthy investigations of a surviving indigenous presence in Puerto Rico, funded by the National Science Foundation, has been a study of population genetics by Juan Carlos Martínez Cruzado, a Harvard trained professor in biology at the University of Puerto Rico, whose primary aim was to use studies of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) in tracing pre-Colombian migration routes. He had previously extracted mtDNA information from four skeletal

<sup>54</sup> These notes on Deagan’s work can be found in Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>55</sup> Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>56</sup> Stan Steiner, *The Islands: Worlds of the Puerto Ricans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 17.

<sup>57</sup> *DeRLAS*, “Some important research contributions of Genetics to the study of Population History and Anthropology in Puerto Rico: An interview with Dr. Juan Carlos Martínez Cruzado, Dept. of Biology, University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez,” *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, 1 (2), Aug 15 (2000), retrieved June 10, 2002, from <http://www.udel.edu/LASP/Vol1-2MartinezC.html>.

<sup>58</sup> See Salvador Brau, *La Colonización de Puerto Rico, Desde el Descubrimiento de la Isla hasta la Reversion a la Corona Española de los Privilegios de Colón*, 3rd ed. (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1966).

<sup>59</sup> Carol F. Jopling, *Puerto Rican Houses in Sociohistorical Perspective* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press; 1988), 11.

remains unearthed in Puerto Rico which were dated to approximately 645 AD.<sup>60</sup> Using the population information from the 1990 Census as well as a computer model, his team randomly chose 1,067 residences in order to match the population density across Puerto Rico. These residences thus constituted a representative sample of all of Puerto Rico's residences. One adult within each one of these residences that was inhabited was randomly chosen to further guarantee the representative nature of the sample. Of those 1,067 residences, 985 were inhabited. Of the 985 inhabited residences, his team was able to contact a selected adult in 875 of them. In exactly 800 of these 875 cases, the adults agreed to give samples of their hair roots in order to study their mtDNA. Thus 800 of the 985 selected adults (81.2%) participated in the study. Of the 800 participants, 489 (61.1%) had mtDNA of indigenous origin, 211 (26.4%) had mtDNA of African origin south of the Sahara, and exactly 100 (12.5%) had mtDNA of Caucasian origin.<sup>61</sup>

While Martínez Cruzado acknowledged that it is certain that historical documentation reveals multiple occasions in which Indians from the Yucatan, from Hispaniola, from Margarita Island, from Brazil, and from other Spanish and Portuguese colonies were brought as slaves to Puerto Rico, nonetheless the historical documentation also reveals that the importation of African slaves greatly exceeded the importation of Indian slaves. What that means is that the greater frequency of indigenous mtDNA in Puerto Rico can only be explained from the basis of the mtDNA of indigenous Puerto Ricans, from whom must have come the major part of the indigenous mtDNA present in the country.<sup>62</sup>

DNA as such will not tell us anything we need to know about cultural survival, and there is always the risk that those who attach great importance to these studies will be led back into the cul de sac of obsolete biological notions of "race." What this mtDNA research does do, at least at one level, is to prove that extinction *simply did not occur*. Ascertaining the extent to which Taíno cultural practices survived through diffusion requires a different type of study of course.

### ***The Bahamas, Haiti and Jamaica***

Usually in the historical literature that became dominant, there is little question of Amerindian extinction in territories such as the Bahamas, Haiti and Jamaica. Yet, even here, important questions are beginning to surface. Speaking of the long assumed complete removal of Amerindians from the Bahamas, as slaves to be exported to Hispaniola and elsewhere, Keegan exercises some skepticism. He notes, "what it striking is that this massive removal of people was apparently accomplished without leaving a more obvious material record....Our present record of the depopulation of the Bahamas amounts to a shoebox full of artifacts."<sup>63</sup>

Examining documents that have received little consideration, there is also reason to believe that Amerindians in Jamaica survived the Spanish conquest. In the Census of 1570, Spanish sources mention an unspecified number of Taínos still living in Jamaica.<sup>64</sup> As late as 1655, when the English expelled the Spaniards, Taínos were still recorded as living in Jamaica. Archaeologists have discovered English lead shot amongst Taíno artifacts. More recent studies of Maroon communities in Jamaica show that even today many non-African plants are used for medicinal purposes, plants that were once part of Taíno pharmacology. Amerindian-fashioned

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<sup>60</sup> DeRLAS, "Some important research contributions..."

<sup>61</sup> Juan C. Martínez Cruzado, "The Use of Mitochondrial DNA to Discover Pre-Columbian Migrations to the Caribbean: Results for Puerto Rico and Expectations for the Dominican Republic," *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology*, retrieved June 10, 2002, from <http://www.kacike.org/MartinezEnglish.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Martínez Cruzado, "The Use of Mitochondrial DNA..."

<sup>63</sup> Keegan, "Destruction of the Taino," 51-56.

<sup>64</sup> See Angel Rosenblat, *La Poblacion Indigena y el mestizaje en America* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1954).

hammocks are still made in Accompong, a major Maroon community in Jamaica, suggesting that the Taíno survived and mixed with Maroons in the mountains of inland Jamaica.<sup>65</sup>

Given that what is today known as Haiti formed a part of the Spanish colony of Hispaniola until it was ceded to the French in 1697, it would not be illogical to assume that the processes of Taíno survival and transculturation identified by Guitar et al would apply to the western third of the island. In this vein, Maya Derin's study of Haiti was one of the first to point out the many areas of "cultural convergence" between the Taíno and African Peoples who were brought to the island as slaves.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly, however, a great deal more work needs to be done for all three of these territories, in terms of the archaeology of the early to mid-colonial period, the ethnohistory of the late colonial period, and contemporary ethnography focused on indigenous survival.

### **SURVIVAL IN THE LESSER ANTILLES: THE CASE OF TRINIDAD**

There has been little or no dispute surrounding recognition of indigenous survival in some of the smaller islands of the Lesser Antilles, such as Dominica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The island of Trinidad presents a different case, one that is similar to that of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and yet a very counterintuitive case it is, especially as Trinidad was constantly settled, and in contact with, a large Amerindian base in the very nearby Orinoco Delta. Flight to the mainland would logically occur well before any threat of extinction could materialize. Repopulation from the mainland, can and did occur in different phases over the last six thousand years. Recognizing these realities of Trinidad's integration with the South American mainland has not, however, been sufficient to halt some from alleging native extinction—this is the first reason that led me to explore what the basis is for these continued assertions.

Columbus first encountered Trinidad in 1498. After many unsuccessful attempts to conquer and settle the island, the Spanish were finally able to establish a more or less permanent settlement almost a full century after discovery, once again attesting to the limits of Spanish power in the region. As in some of the Greater Antillean cases, it is not clear that Spanish sources were ever adequately aware of the size of the Amerindian population base. Into the 1600s, Spanish sources confess that there was an unknown number of Indians living in the three forested mountain ranges of north, central and south Trinidad.<sup>67</sup> Archaeologist Arie Boomert reveals that this Amerindian population was in a state of flux, especially as throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Amerindian groups from the mainland, and from parts of the Lesser Antilles, settled in Trinidad. In 1786, Governor Chacon himself granted some land to a group of Caribs from St. Vincent, with more entering Trinidad in the early 1800s after a volcano eruption on St. Vincent destroyed their settlements. Cariban-speaking Chaima Indians from the west coast of the Gulf of Paria also settled in west Trinidad in the early 1800s, around the town of Carapichaima. During the early 1800s, Chaguanas Indians from the Orinoco also settled in west Trinidad.<sup>68</sup>

Given the desperate circumstances in which the Spanish settlers in Trinidad all too often found themselves, one of the unexplored ironies of the historiography of Trinidad is that one might just as easily have written of the extinction of the Spanish on the island. For instance, historian Jesse Noel observed that following the cocoa blight of 1725-1728, total economic

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<sup>65</sup> See Glenn Woodley, "The Taíno of Jamaica: A brief history of the Indigenous population of Jamaica," retrieved June 10, 2002, from <http://www.uslegacies.org/Legacies/Jamaica.shtml>.

<sup>66</sup> See Maya Derin, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: McPherson & Co., 1991). See especially 61-67 and appendix B, 271-286.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony De Verteuil, *Martyrs and Murderers: Trinidad, 1699* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: St. Mary's College, 1995), 14.

<sup>68</sup> Arie Boomert, "Our Amerindian Heritage," *Trinidad Naturalist* 4 (4) (Jul-Aug 1982), 37-38.

collapse ensued: “the Hispanic element of the population did not reach a sufficiently large enough size again in order to ensure a nucleus for another Hispanoamerican community,” and the population of Trinidad apparently consisted of only 50 adult white males, 200 black adult males, and “thousands” of Indians.<sup>69</sup> Even though 50 years later Trinidad’s population increased to 3,433, indigenous people still formed more than half of the total number.<sup>70</sup> Historian C.R. Ottley concluded that “two hundred years after its discovery by Columbus the island was still in the hands of its indigenous inhabitants. Spain found it impossible to give the island the help needed for its development, nor was she able to find the men and money to subdue the Indians. The few Spaniards at St. Joseph [the Spanish capital of Trinidad] remained there under sufferance.”<sup>71</sup> Speaking of the period that ensued the cocoa blight mentioned by Noel above, Ottley commented that Trinidad entered a long, dry period of absent trade with Spain, resorting to a survival economy of basic self-sufficiency: “the handful of Spaniards, who had built their houses of mud and wattle, at St. Joseph, struggled on. They managed to eke out a precarious existence from the surrounding countryside.”<sup>72</sup> This was not, however, a purely improvised survival economy. As Ottley explained, the settlers “adopted to a large extent the customs of the country, and lived on the cassava...corn, and other indigenous foods of the Indians.”<sup>73</sup> More than that, the Spanish moved into the forests with their Amerindian partners: a decree of 1761 exhorted all the Spanish inhabitants of Trinidad, “to come out of the woods where they now live and establish a society in the town of St. Joseph.”<sup>74</sup>

The apparent frailty of the Spanish colonial enterprise in Trinidad, an island that became a marginal outpost of a severely overstretched empire, should warrant revision of the cultural processes we have assumed prevailed on the island. I would argue that, in terms of transculturation, we should give a fair amount of recognition to processes of “Amerindianization,” *at least* as much as “Hispanization,” which certainly also occurred in terms of language and religion. In the historical literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a fair amount of attention was paid to the question of Spanish assimilation into “Amerindian ways” in Trinidad (sometimes for ideologically motivated purposes, i.e., to cast both Amerindians and Spaniards as traditional, non-industrious, unprogressive, and lacking a Protestant work ethic). There is little doubt that those who are today called “Spanish” in Trinidad strongly resemble the *guajiros* of Cuba in many respects: many are clearly of mestizo background, and preserved household traditions of indisputable Amerindian origins. Reflecting on this fact led Ottley to make the following observations: that in order to ensure their survival in a neglected colony without much in the way of supplies from, or communication with Spain, “the white man was forced to adopt the way of life of the Indians,” including the consumption of cassava, using Amerindian techniques for processing it. Reporting on documents describing Port of Spain, the future capital, in 1757, Ottley tells us that its population was “a mixture of Indianized half-breed Spaniards, and some full-blooded French strangers....streets were bordered by the mud-huts of the Spaniards and half-breed Indians....By 1766, the town had become ‘an irregular collection of seventy-eight mud huts covered with thatch’....The people in Port-of-Spain were, for the most part, the offspring of the many unions, some of them faithful and lasting, between the early Spanish settlers and the native Indian women whom they had taken for wives.”<sup>75</sup> As a result of this intensive interaction

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<sup>69</sup> Jesse A. Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Jesse A. Noel, *Trinidad, Provincia de Venezuela*, 94.

<sup>71</sup> C. Robert Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad, From 1498-1797* (Diego Martin, Trinidad: C. R. Ottley, 1955), 23.

<sup>72</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 40.

<sup>73</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 58.

<sup>75</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 50-54.

and the unions that were formed, Ottley is not surprised that a number of Amerindian household traditions survived, e.g. the weaving of “Carib baskets,” the processing of cassava with woven implements, or baking cassava on hot stones, as he puts it.<sup>76</sup> Since there was little in the way of trade with the outside world, the life of Spanish settlers differed little from that of the native people, as Ottley describes: “with their Indian wives and half-breed children, they gathered the fruit, fish, and game of the country,” they also “clothed themselves in guayco (Indian rough cloth),” and ate out of calabashes.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the lack of adequate knowledge of the size of Trinidad’s Amerindian population base, inadequate recognition of the reality of integration and exchange between that population with kin groups on the mainland, and overlooking the centuries of intense amalgamation between the Spanish and Amerindian communities of Trinidad, writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century insisted that Amerindians in Trinidad had become “virtually extinct”.<sup>78</sup> Headcounts of those deemed to be “pure Indians” exclusively relied on the recorded populations of mission villages. Not all Amerindians lived in the missions, however, a fact that, ironically, was also admitted by some of those writers who persisted with the extinction theme nonetheless.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the counting proceeded according to racial criteria: a child born of an Amerindian mother and a Spanish father, even if raised by the Amerindian mother alone (as was often the case), would *not* be considered Amerindian under the law and was essentially excused from the mission.<sup>80</sup> By the late 1800s, these racialized characterizations of indigenous identity were explicit and formed an accepted convention for writing about indigenous peoples, as is often still the case in former British colonies. One English writer who visited Trinidad explained that “probably many of them [Amerindians] had been *absorbed* by intermarriage with the invaders....At present, there is hardly an Indian of certainly *pure blood* in the island, and that only in the northern mountains.”<sup>81</sup> What also stands out in such statements is the uncertainty and meandering nature of the assertions—the Amerindians are gone, probably, alright, maybe not that, it’s that they are not pure blooded, alright, maybe they are, but only in some parts of the island—and the racial formula that obscures cultural survival by confusing cultures with phenotypes.

In some cases, even among those professing Amerindian extinction, there is frank acknowledgement of the paucity of the documentary record. E. L. Joseph, an early English historian of Trinidad, noted, “at the capture of the island by the British, in 1797, most of the old records were either carried off to Caracas, or destroyed. A few years since, an English Catholic Priest, who was Curate of the Church of San Josef, endeavored to collect and to preserve the old records, but unfortunately they were in a state too dilapidated to be of much use to me. I am

<sup>76</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 47.

<sup>78</sup> L.A.A. De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography, Natural Resources, Administration, Present Condition, and Prospects* (London: Ward & Lock, 1858).

<sup>79</sup> De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography...*: “The few aborigines yet remaining in the colony are leading an isolated life in the forests, depending for their subsistence upon hunting and fishing, using the bow and arrow in preference to the fowling-piece, and, in short, retaining their savage ancestral habits precisely as if the light of civilization and the sun of Christianity had never beamed on their lovely island of *Jere*. A few families of Indian descent are still, however, to be met with in different parts of the island, all speaking the Spanish language and having preserved Spanish habits – fond of smoking, dancing, and all other kinds of amusements, but above all, of the *dolce far niente*. They are, generally, possessors of *conucos*, that is to say of a few acres of land, which they cultivate in provisions and coffee, but particularly in cacao.” (174-175)

<sup>80</sup> The testimony of Martin Sorzano, former *corregidor* of the mission of Santa Rosa in Arima, made it clear that race was the basis for characterizing the indigenous presence. In William Hardin Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842), 109.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Kingsley, *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1877), 74.

therefore obliged to depend on tradition preserved amongst a few old families, together with their papers.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Joseph pointed to this problem more than once in his text: “I have done the best I could, but feel conscious that my most strenuous efforts are weak, because I have wanted the very sinews of history, that is to say, authenticated records....so totally have all authenticated records of [particular events] disappeared....There are in possession of the Cabildo some papers still older than those I have had recourse to, but unfortunately they are so decayed by time, and eaten by insects, as to be of no avail.”<sup>83</sup>

It is difficult to conclude that where the argument of extinction has been put forth, the case has been made only weakly at best. An argument for indigenous cultural and demographic continuity in Trinidad can be made just as easily, even more so given that the preponderance of documents show a limited Spanish presence, the feeble exercise of imperial power, dependence on Amerindians for survival, intermarriage and miscegenation, and the maintenance of everyday Amerindian traditions in the sphere of the household, especially with reference to agriculture and cuisine.

### **EXTINCTION AS A MOTIVATED NARRATIVE**

If we accept evidence of survival, we must, clearly, question the logic of the narrative of extinction. Indeed, as the evidence for extinction tends to be either nonexistent or extremely debatable, we have no choice but to reexamine survival theses. We have now seen several cases that can be made for speaking of indigenous cultural and demographic survival in the Caribbean. Much of this material is based on documents and accounts that have been available for centuries in some cases. That leaves us with an important interpretive problem: Why, then, do so many modern authors continue to repeat assertions of the extinction of Caribbean Amerindians? It is not just an accident that they do, if only because arguments for extinction serve, and have served, a number of valuable purposes, depending on the interests involved.

The extinction of the Amerindian could be argued by interests whose goal was to *preserve* Amerindians from further enslavement as much as it could be argued by those who sought larger reserves of African slave labor. The extinction of the Amerindian could be blamed on Amerindians themselves, as in the not uncommon allegations that the Caribs exterminated, and ate, the Arawaks, thus requiring that Spaniards deal with Caribs unmercifully. The extinction of the Amerindian could also be drafted into anti-African racial diatribes, where Africans were demonized by travel writers as having polluted and diminished “the Carib race” in places such as Dominica. In colonial discourse, Amerindian extinction could be asserted to advance European landholding interests, or negated in narratives that sought to limit Afro-Caribbean land acquisitions.

Thus, aside from the symbolic advantage conferred by the narrative of extinction, concrete political economic and material advantages were also to be had. The extinction of the natives demanded that African slaves be imported, thereby allowing not the survival of the plantation economy as such, but rather its expansion. Natives alleged to be extinct could be deleted from consideration in the many land grabs that marginalized Caribbean peasantries. Abolishing indigeneity would also deny many populations of African-Amerindian parentage any claim to territory based on notions of historical precedence that could undermine European primacy. Indeed, Afro-Amerindians such as the Garifuna were exiled with little regard for their rights to a land (St. Vincent) which the British had invaded and occupied only a short time before their exiling the Garifuna to Central America.

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<sup>82</sup> E. L. Joseph, *History of Trinidad* (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1970 (1838), 140.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 146-147.

Allegations of extinction could even be used as part of the ideological rivalry marking inter-European competition. If the Black Legend, concerning the Spanish “destruction” of the Indians, became so widespread, it owes a great deal to the work of the British in spreading it.<sup>84</sup> The origins of the Black Legend can be found in the work of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, ironic in that Las Casas was ostensibly motivated to defend Amerindians from enslavement, only to provide a rationale for arguing that they had in fact been exterminated through the many Spanish excesses of which he wrote. As Keegan puts it, “so severe was his critique that it later fueled the anti-Hispanic Black Legend, the distorted image of the Spanish as inherently intolerant and cruel that was put forward in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to denigrate and deny Spanish contributions to European civilization.”<sup>85</sup>

As interesting and vital as these diverse, early, uses of extinction allegations were, they do not account for the continuity of the extinction narrative, indeed, for its growth, institutionalization and even popularization well beyond the original contexts that gave these allegations any utility. In this section and the next, I will identify two principal themes that I believe may account for the sustained life of the extinction narrative. One is the emergence of evolutionary paradigms, which came to dominance in Europe and the Americas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second is the emergence of Caribbean nation-states, led by European-trained elites, and driven by modernizing ideologies of development and progress.

### ***“Inevitably, stronger peoples took over”***

In my own reading of historical writings about Trinidad, authored by a string of 19<sup>th</sup> century European writers, and quoted later by an even larger stream of academics, I became gradually impressed with a recurring theme that permeated many of these writings. This theme is what I have come to identify as exemplifying an evolutionist perspective. Teleology, evolutionary inevitability, the rise of one and the fall of the other, total change and total extinction, “stronger” and “superior” peoples inheriting the right to dominate—all of these are part of an evolutionist discourse of which extinction is a narrative component.

One of the earliest historians of Trinidad was E.L. Joseph from Britain. Writing in a book published in 1838, he was perhaps the first writer to speak of the “extirpation of this doomed race,”<sup>86</sup> indicating that both “race” and a cognate of “extinction” were clearly available as concepts to be applied at the time. When describing what he saw as the plight of the Amerindians, L.A.A. de Verteuil, a French historian of Trinidad, wrote 20 years later in 1858 that they had “finally sunk under the ascendancy of a more intelligent race.”<sup>87</sup> He was not alone to the extent that under the laws of the British colony, the Amerindians were “considered in the light of minors,”<sup>88</sup> which carries assumptions of being irresponsible, not intellectually developed, and incapable of self-administration (after several thousand years of living in that territory).

Writing four decades later, Collens, a visiting English travel writer who authored a number of travel guides about Trinidad that were published by the colonial government of the island, simply reproduced these earlier messages, but this time flavoring his writing with allusions to the plight of North American Plains Indians: “as in most other similar cases, persecution or civilization, perhaps both, have driven before them these wild children of the plains, until they have become, so far as Trinidad is concerned, all but extinct.”<sup>89</sup> In actuality, Trinidad did not have “plains Indians” as the indigenous population heavily favored the coasts

<sup>84</sup> Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>85</sup> Keegan, “Destruction of the Taino,” 51-56.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph, *History of Trinidad*, 135.

<sup>87</sup> De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography...*, 172.

<sup>88</sup> De Verteuil, *Trinidad: Its Geography...*, 300.

<sup>89</sup> James Henry Collens, *Centenary of Trinidad, 1797-1897* (Port of Spain: Government Printing Office, 1896), 7.

and nearby mountains. They did not practice large-scale agriculture, nor did they hunt large herds of roaming animals. Writing in the same period, and again with references made to North American Indians, L.M. Fraser wrote: “As in North America the Red Indians have gradually disappeared before the encroaching white races.”<sup>90</sup> Collens’ and Fraser’s imagery places Trinidad within a broader, supra-local context, wherein Trinidad is reduced to another episode of the worldwide transformation that would be hailed as the victory of Western civilization. Of course, when faced with the onslaught of British progress, as one might logically insert here, the Amerindians of Trinidad were doomed to extinction, especially as they “lived a lazy, indolent life.”<sup>91</sup>

The romance of the vanishing Amerindian was couched in terms of European regret and remorse which, paradoxically, served to reinforce the image of the European as a stronger, fitter, sturdier being. While Amerindians in the region had for centuries produced their own inebriating beverages, it was only with the advent of Europeans that they supposedly succumbed to drink. Thus, writing five decades after Collens, Ottley would say that drink “made the task of rescuing them from racial extinction ineffective and hopeless.”<sup>92</sup> By this time, and now reaching into our recent past, the terminology of “racial extinction” had become entrenched, rarely questioned if ever, serving as a master trope into which all facts and accounts were folded in, as if part of a well-designed, preconfigured story.

By the 1970s, a full 130 years after E.L. Joseph, Trinidadian historian Bridget Brereton wrote, “the Amerindians gave way to newer and sturdier people. Their day was nearly done, and they had no role to play in the development of Trinidad by the later nineteenth century.”<sup>93</sup> The *story* of Amerindian extinction has been a popular one, and that popularity alone has been enough, thus far at any rate, to withstand, deflect, or simply preempt any critical scrutiny. The rise of the new nation-state, modeled on European precedents, importing ideologies of progress and development, would serve as the next critical component in burying Amerindians under the weight of an allegedly long-dead past.

### **YEAR ZERO: THE NEW NATION-STATE**

In the broadest terms, extinction can be seen as the concomitant of an assimilationist discourse that posits a universal path of progress and development, where tradition and its tribal upholders would be left behind in the wake of the advance of science, reason and material prosperity. Nationalist writers would thus be tempted to only hail indigenous peoples, at most, as a “first root,” but one that had been overtaken by modern and development-oriented nation-states.

Writing of the Dominican Republic, Lynne Guitar notes that for the past 510 years, because of the “discovery” of Hispaniola and its colonization by Spaniards, residents of today’s Dominican Republic have maintained an image of themselves as “Spaniards.” Spanish heroes, she explains, have been “glorified in all aspects of Dominican history that are taught from pre-Kindergarten through the university level, and Spanish cultural elements have been glorified in Dominican architecture, paintings, and literature.”<sup>94</sup> Dominican Taínos are denied a place in the making of the nation essentially as a derivative of denying them their humanity, as Guitar explains:

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<sup>90</sup> Lionel Mordant Fraser, *History of Trinidad (First Period), from 1781 to 1813, Vol. I* (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1971 [1891]). 1.

<sup>91</sup> Collens, *Centenary of Trinidad*, 114.

<sup>92</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 55.

<sup>93</sup> Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>94</sup> Lynne Guitar, “Documenting the Myth of Taíno Extinction” *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology*. Retrieved June 10, 2002, from <http://www.kacike.org/GuitarEnglish.html>.

As in other Latin American countries that were once Spanish colonies, the island's indigenous peoples, the Taínos, are set upon a pedestal of the past—they are identified as frozen in a particular pre-Columbian and early Columbian time frame and highly admired as part of the island's unique past. As in other Latin American countries, to be Indian in the present Dominican era means to be backward, rustic, gullible, or even feeble minded. Dominicans deny that Taínos survived the Spanish conquest, deny that they had the oh-so-human ability to change and adapt to new situations like the arrival of strangers.<sup>95</sup>

The alleged extinction of the Taíno people has formed an important part of nationalist projects in the Spanish Caribbean, used by *indigenistas* to emphasize the brutality of the conquest and by elites to emphasize *hispanidad*. In Cuba, there has been strong resistance in government circles, and among government supported academics, to recognizing Taíno survival as it can be seen by some in power (quite wrongly I must add) as threatening national unity by introducing a sectarian, ethnic consciousness that is contrary to socialist ideals. Ultimately, in a nation-state where industrialization, electrical power, urban development, paved roads, cars, computers, and so forth, are highly prized, images of the Amerindian past will not be seized upon as a development model for modern(izing) Cuba.

In the case of Trinidad, one can see with some ease that ideologies of progress that looked to Britain and the United States as the zenith of human development, to be emulated and caught up to, had entered into early nationalist historiography, in ways reminiscent of the early independence history of Latin America, but only 120 years later. Modern Trinidadian stereotypes of the Amerindian tend to emphasize “their idolatrous, lazy, carefree existence.”<sup>96</sup> Contrasted with the ways of the Anglo-American Protestant entrepreneur, the Amerindians' way of life was one “in which industry was not to be found, and, which revolved around the character trait of indolence, both of mind and body.”<sup>97</sup> As Coleridge wrote, with considerable dismay, of Amerindians in the missions of Trinidad that he visited, they apparently failed to even appreciate the value of money, as unmoved as they were when coins were placed in their hands.<sup>98</sup> Not appreciating the value of money might be equated with basic intellectual deficiency, as Joseph wrote of Amerindians squatting in silence, in a “simian posture,” unmoved by the world around them.<sup>99</sup>

Having amalgamated with the Amerindians, Spanish-Trinidadians would be held by later nationalists as equally culpable as the Amerindians for failing to “develop” Trinidad. In Ottley's text, once so prominent that it was used to teach history in Trinidadian secondary schools, the lethargy of the Spanish was matched in equal measure by the indolence of the Indian. Spanish sloth led them to Indian ways, to irrational uses of the colony, a colony that could have been independent long before 1962 if properly developed. “Poverty and social inactivity” marked Spanish life in Trinidad, as the Spanish were “completely asleep”. Natural resources were not harnessed, according to Ottley who lamented the “unexplored natural wealth and the unexploited richness of its fertile valleys...all hope for a better life had been abandoned by its inhabitants. The Spanish word *mañana* (tomorrow) became household.”<sup>100</sup> Ironically, these sorts of comments are still made by many Trinidadians about Trinidad today, regardless of its petroleum, chemical and steel industries. This is possibly taking us into another trope, one reserved for

<sup>95</sup> Guitar, “Documenting the Myth.”

<sup>96</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 23.

<sup>97</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 28.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies* (London: John Murray, 1826).

<sup>99</sup> Joseph, *History of Trinidad*.

<sup>100</sup> Ottley, *An Account of Life in Spanish Trinidad*, 48-49.

speaking about the “third world” as plagued by perennial “backwardness” and “underdevelopment,” both being terms that also derive from Eurocentric evolutionary discourse.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that the “success” of extinctionist narratives derives from something well beyond a collection of questionable, partial and incomplete documentation. That “something” I have identified is an evolutionary discourse in which Amerindians, and all other “traditional cultures,” are doomed to vanish in the wake of modernization. It is an old thesis, into which new life has been repeatedly breathed over the past 150 years, from Spencerian ideas of social evolution, to early anthropological theories of cultural evolution, to post-World War II theories of modernization. From such vantage points, the Amerindian was idealized and romanticized, ultimately and finally, as a pathetic creature, doomed to inevitable erasure. To borrow from the recently revamped evolutionist thesis of Francis Fukuyama, for the Amerindians history had come to an end. As a direct result of these prejudices—because, after all, we are dealing with historiographies written before their encounter with suitably chosen facts—contemporary “claimants” (as they are termed, with suspicion) of Amerindian identities are held either in ridicule, disbelief, or disappointment for failing to deliver a projection of themselves that is consonant with depictions written five centuries ago. Few, or no, other people on this planet have been consistently held to such rigid standards of “proof,” to represent themselves with an authenticity that accords with distant antiquity, like museum pieces on legs. In the meantime, discounting the Indian left political authorities and land barons with an open landscape to reapportion for themselves. Extinction has been even better for colonial domination and for big business than it has been for a collectively imagined European ego. Extinction, as an idea, continues to be as useful as it is “virtual.”

European colonizers’ concerted efforts in shrouding indigenous identities in an aura of primitivism, backwardness, ignorance, poverty and even cannibalism, would ensure that many modern prospective claimants to an indigenous identity would at least pause with the realization of the social stigma accompanying indigeneity in the Caribbean. To this day media giants such as Disney still feel free to reproduce and project stereotypes of Carib cannibalism, simply ignoring modern day Carib critics as if they did not exist. Given that the gain to be had in self-identifying as Amerindian in the modern Caribbean is virtually zero, one has to be impressed that many thousands still do.

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