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Making sense of the native Caribbean

Critique of recent attempts to make sense of the history and anthropology of the native Caribbean. These works are based on the writings of Columbus and his companions and assume that there were 2 tribes: the Arawaks and Caribs. Author argues however that much work is needed to untangle the complex imbrication of native Caribbean and European colonial history.

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MAKING SENSE OF THE NATIVE CARIBBEAN

The quincentenary of the discovery by Caribbean islanders of a Genoese sailor in the service of Spain who thought he was off the coast of China has served to refocus attention on a part of the world whose native history has been little studied. Christopher Columbus eventually made some sense of the Caribbean, at least to his own satisfaction: one of his most lasting, if least recognized, achievements was to divide the native population of the Caribbean into two quite separate peoples, a division that has marked perceptions of the area now for five hundred years. This essay focuses on some recent attempts to make sense of the history and anthropology of the native Caribbean, and argues that much work is yet needed to untangle their complex imbrication with European colonial history.¹

THE NOVEL

An outline of the pre-Columbian history of the Caribbean occupies the first chapter of James Michener's block-busting 672-page historical novel, *Caribbean*, published in 1989, a useful source of popular conceptions about the native populations of the area. Michener's story begins in 1310 – a seemingly arbitrary date – on an island “which would later be named Dominica” (p. 5). The native name of the island was Waitukubuli, but this cannot be used because of its association with the Caribs who are about to overrun the island; so we are moved seamlessly from the absence of a name to the name given by the Spaniards. Three characters feature in this chapter, an Arawak

couple, Bakámu and Tiwánee, and the Carib leader Karúku. Bakámu has traveled to the islands immediately north and south of Dominica, both of which the novel again refers to by their future names, Guadeloupe and Martinique, and both of which Bakámu discovered, somewhat surprisingly, to be uninhabited.

In *Caribbean* the differences between the Arawaks and the Caribs are marked:

The Arawaks on this and other islands were one of the most peaceful peoples in the world: they had no word for war, for none was needed, and they reared their children in abounding love ... They lived in harmony with their small universe, reveling in the abundance and beauty of the island and accepting the hurricanes when they roared in to remind them that nature was omnipotent, not man. (p. 9)

The Caribs are taller and darker-skinned: "The heritage of the Caribs was brutality, warfare and little else ... They gloried in war and organized their society solely for its conduct. A fierce, terrible people, they were cannibals who fought any strangers, not only to subdue them but also to eat them" (p. 10). As one might perhaps expect of cannibals their eating habits are "totally primitive ... grabbing with dirty fingers scraps of meat from the common platter," while the Arawaks have introduced unspecified "refinements" in table manners. Carib canoes are heavier and less well-designed than Arawak canoes, and even their personal adornment is "of a warlike nature" (p. 11). The underlying template here is the distinction between the "military Spartans" and the "cultured Athenians" (p. 11); and the best that can be said about the Caribs is that, like the Spartans, they were "very good at what they chose to do" (p. 11). Karúku, the Carib leader, is described as having "a keen sense of tactics and strategy taught him by his father and grandfather, who had also been awesome warriors" (p. 10). Karúku is a military strategist who "drills his cadres" (p. 18).

The first chapter of *Caribbean* is called "A Hedge of Croton." Bakámu and Tiwánee are on one level an ordinary Arawak couple, but the plot of land on which their round hut stands is also easily determined because it "was outlined by a remarkable hedge which glowed when sunlight reflected from it" (p. 6). Tiwánee is largely described through her relationship with this hedge: "A hedge of croton was a perpetual bewilderment and joy, because the individual plants were a rowdy lot; they grew in wild profusion, obedient to none of the sensible laws that governed ordinary plants" (p. 6). Tiwánee trims her hedge regularly and with great determination, only to find that some of the plants shoot up out of all proportion, so much so "that she had to eliminate them, for they ruined her hedge" (p. 6). This unlikely activity seems to serve two functions. It marks out this couple as proto-

bourgeois, with their own defined sense of space: these Arawaks may live in a communist utopia, but they have amongst them, as their outstanding family unit, a couple who clearly have premonitions of the joys of private property.

Second, the hedge symbolizes freedom and “the joyousness of living” (p. 17):

One evening as Tiwánee sat with her husband in the sunset glow, surveying her lovely but unruly croton hedge, she told Bakámu: “This is the plant closest to people. It can be anything, tall or short, this color or that, bright or dark. You can’t make it obey, for it lives by its own rules, but if you let it have its own way, it can be glorious.” (p. 6)

This is the perfect image of Michener’s liberalism: Tiwánee provides some shape and trims off the excesses, playing the role of an enabling government; the various croton plants “live by their own rules” – at least until trimmed – but provide a glorious and – the crucial point – multi-colored display. The magic properties of the hedge are best suggested when it is described as providing shelter for Tiwánee during a hurricane (p. 8). All this is to be lost when the Caribs arrive.

Another major difference between the Arawaks and the Caribs is that the Arawaks are settled – the story of their arrival on Dominica is known only from legend; while the Caribs are described as “the terrors in any area into which they wandered” (p. 11). Population movement is motivated, it seems, by some crude will to power: Karúku had left the Orinoco “primarily to find a new area which he could dominate” (p. 10). Domination means eating the men they captured in battle, castrating the young boys to fatten them like capons for later feasts, and taking the most beautiful and healthy young women in order to enhance the vitality of their own group. One might have thought that this procedure, “practiced for hundred of years,” (p. 10) would have weakened the quotient of “Caribness” in the tribe of marauders, but this seems not to be an issue. They are indeed “a hybrid group of people, constantly reinforced by fresh blood,” but they profit from “the brutal strength that such hybridism often produces” (p. 11).

The Caribs want to exterminate the Arawaks. When Michener first uses the word “extermination,” it becomes the occasion for the book’s opening homily:

In many corners of the world at this time similar expeditions were being launched with similar goals, as groups of human beings, finding it impossible to coexist with those of a different color or religion, were concluding that extermination was the only solution. This conviction would continue to scar the world for the next eight hundred years and probably long after that. (p. 10)

Historians had not previously realized the importance of 1310. An argument could certainly be made that the era of modern European colonialism dates from the exploration of the Atlantic islands at roughly this time (see Fernández-Armesto 1987; Phillips 1988). But Michener's move here works on a higher, almost Toynbeesque level, suggesting that at this moment in different parts of the world, color and religion became issues of great moment, initiating expeditions of extermination:

This first battle would foreshadow many more that would scar the islands of this beautiful sea. In far western reaches, brutal warriors from central Mexico would crush the kindlier civilizations of the Maya. Exploring newcomers from Spain would decimate the peaceful Indians they found. Englishmen on far western Barbados would harry peaceful cargo ships and put all to the sword. And in island after island white owners would treat black slaves with a sickening barbarity. The assault of the warlike Caribs upon the peaceful Arawaks was merely the first in an unbroken chain of brutalities. (pp. 18-19)

The Caribs do not obviously fit into this pattern, and neither color or religion are mentioned as motives for their "wanderings" (though there is that mention of "darker-skinned"). But the motif has generally worked to deny the singularity of the European phenomenon. The Caribs were invaders, too; therefore the Spaniards, for all their brutality, were not guilty of introducing the exterminating impulse into the Caribbean: their behavior is even put into perspective by the awesome ferocity and inhumanity of the Caribs. In this story the Caribs represent one supposed facet of human nature, an instinct for destruction which reappears later in Michener's novel when dealing with phenomena such as the Tontons Macoutes.

The opposition between Arawak and Carib is marked by the treatment of women: "... the Arawaks had progressed to the point in civilization in which they respected, defended and adored women, while the Caribs treated them only as beasts of burden and breeders of new warriors" (p. 18); and the Arawaks' role as early paragons of the civilizational process is also crucially manifest in their enjoyment of the "ball game": "Mysteriously, these ball courts of the ancient Arawaks and their cousins the Maya to the west were similar in size to the fields that Europeans and Americans centuries later would choose for their soccer, football, rugby, and lacrosse fields, some eighty yards long by thirty wide" (p. 14). In this Caribbean ball game, the ball is struck only by the shoulder or hip, the captain of each team wearing a huge stone ring resting about his middle: "Since it weighed about twenty-four pounds, it gave extraordinary power when he struck the ball either with it directly or with his weighted hip" (p. 15). The rubber balls necessary for the game circulate somewhat mysteriously from the jungles of the mainland and are "cherished as national treasures" (p. 15). Although

the game clearly has ritual and even religious significance, the Arawak attitude towards it has developed in distinctly secular directions. Originally – “in the ancient days” (p. 16) – the captain of the losing team was decapitated and his blood scattered on the grass to ensure that it would remain green. However, “... after some centuries of such sacrifices the practical-minded Arawaks had reasoned among themselves: ‘Isn’t it rather ridiculous and lacking in profit to kill off each planting season the second-best player we have?’” (p. 16). Any society that can think in terms of profit is clearly developing along the right lines, especially if it leads its members to enjoy a ball game for its own sake, even one that they can excel at because nobody else plays it.

Karúku, the Carib chief, is placed beyond the boundary of proper human behavior by his lack of appreciation of the ball game: “Grown men playing a game! ... What kind of people are they, down there? No army? No weapons? No defenses? What do they think life is?” (p. 17). This is the book’s fundamental division: between those who think that life is for playing games, and those who think that it is for killing: “The impending struggle between these two contrasting groups was bound to be unequal, for in the short run brutality always wins; it takes longer for amity to prevail” (p. 18).

The Caribs are human enough to see that this island is indeed “a paradise,” (p. 11) and to want to settle there. It is left to Tiwánee, after her husband has been brutally killed, to glimpse “not only today’s horror but also the dreadful future of this hideous new society” (p. 20). The first two desecrations that Tiwánee witnesses are the destruction of the ball park – “This will be a training ground for warriors!”, Karúku cries (p. 20) – and the burning of the rubber ball – “Destroy that plaything of children!” (p. 20). But it is the third obscenity, to use Michener’s word, which was the worst, because it “foreshadowed what the new world would be like” (p. 20). This is a bold move. Historians may have imagined the “new world” as beginning in 1492, when the three worlds of Asia, Africa, and Europe encountered that fourth “quarter” previously unknown to them. For Michener the “new world” begins in 1310 when indigenous American brutality destroys indigenous American paradise, involving not just the killing of human beings but “the assassination of benevolent ideas” and “the destruction of these great good things” – such as the ball game and, final desecration, the hedge of croton which is cleared because assailants might hide there.

Paradoxically, Tiwánee finds hope in this last act of reduction. She realizes that Karúku – “the tyrant” (p. 20) – despite his martial ideology, is driven by fear: “He does not move like a hero, but like a coward,” unlike her dead husband, Bakámu, who “living freely, was afraid of nothing” (p. 20). This thought gives her the strength to break free of her Carib captors, dash up to Karúku, and plunge her dagger “deep into his heart” (p. 21).

My rhetoric will already have made it clear that I intend to submit this picture of the native Caribbean to critique. Michener is of course a decoy rather than the real target: the subject of the critique will be the recent swathe of scholarly books that have made sense of the Caribbean for a quincentenary readership. However, I use Michener's *Caribbean* to make a serious point: his picture of the native Caribbean is, on the surface, quite uncontroversial. It is entirely consonant with scholarly orthodoxy; indeed it is highly likely that Michener or his researchers have drawn on that orthodoxy. (At the beginning of *Caribbean* Michener states that there is "historical evidence for the life of the two tribes as portrayed," although none is provided in the "Further Reading" section at the back of the book.) Certainly there is nothing in the most highly regarded of the quincentenary publications that would contradict Michener's account. And, of course, the historical "evidence" for the life of the "two tribes" goes back to the writings of Columbus and his companions on the first two voyages to the Caribbean in 1492 and 1493.

FIRST CONTACT

On the evening of October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus sat down to compose in writing his first impressions of the island in the Caribbean at which he had earlier that day made landfall, and in particular of its native inhabitants, with whom he had exchanged words and gestures. The paragraphs Columbus wrote that evening constitute the first European attempt to make sense of the native Caribbean.

In the *diario* as it has come down to us Columbus recalls his gifts of red caps and glass beads in which the native inhabitants took such pleasure. He describes the native bodies as well-formed and handsome; as naked; and as the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white. These natives are unacquainted with arms and cut themselves through ignorance on the edge of Spanish swords. Taken alongside their supposed innocence of economic values and their lack of clothes, the picture is quickly established of a set of simple and innocent pagans. From the repertoire of non-European figures available to fifteenth-century travelers, the native inhabitants of these Caribbean islands most resemble Hellenic primitives.

But this is no simple golden age world, for it carries the scars of a political process:

I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies and I made signs to them asking what they were: and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there

and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves; and I believed and believe that they come here from tierra firme to take them captive. (Columbus 1989:67)

These words articulate the first version of the dualistic interpretation of the native Caribbean which has shown such remarkable longevity: these marks of wounds on native bodies “scar the islands of this beautiful sea,” in Michener’s resonant phrase.

As it happens this passage is also at the heart of what is arguably the single most important piece of quincentenary scholarship yet to appear, David Henige’s *In Search of Columbus* (1991). This book (and two associated articles: Henige 1992 and Henige and Zamora 1989) provide an exemplary lesson in the careful reading of source material. Nothing has bedevilled the attempt to make sense of the early colonial history of the Caribbean more than the naive reading of colonial sources. Amongst these sources Columbus’s so-called log or *diario* of his first voyage has always held a pre-eminent place – the first piece of European writing about America and, moreover, a text which seemed to have been produced “to the moment,” immediate impressions unrevised. Problems with this text have always been recognized, of course, because of the loss of the original and contemporary dependence on the partial transcription and paraphrase by Bartolomé de las Casas, itself only re-discovered at the end of the eighteenth century; but the accuracy of Las Casas’s transcription and paraphrase has rarely been doubted except by those like Henry Vignaud (1911) and Rómulo Carbia (1931) who argued that the whole thing was a forgery.

Henige’s case is unremittingly negative. By means of a judicious combination of textual criticism and historiographic analysis he argues the likelihood – and he is careful not to claim more than this – that the text as we have it bears comparatively little relationship to the text Columbus wrote, and certainly less relationship than is usually taken for granted. Even the notion of “the text as we have it” is problematic, given that the only passably diplomatic transcriptions did not appear until 1976 and 1989. Henige makes his case through an accretion of detail which is impossible to reproduce here: my remarks will focus on this one passage describing the “marks of wounds.”

A key element here is the role of Las Casas who, according to Henige, is to be considered the author of the *diario* as we now have it. Henige points out how little we know about the circumstances in which Las Casas transcribed Columbus’s text. It has usually been presumed that Las Casas transcribed the *diario* as an adjunct to compiling his massive *Historia de las Indias*, but given that this was almost a lifetime project, the transcription could have been made at any time throughout Las Casas’s long writing

career – though Henige favors 1552 as a likely date. We do not know for sure exactly what Las Casas was copying, except that it almost certainly was not the “original” text: Columbus may have made a fair copy himself, at least one copy was made on royal authority, probably by two scribes working alternately, and it may even have been a paraphrase of one of these transcriptions that Las Casas was working from.

One feature of Las Casas’s transcription is specially worthy of note as a key to the image of Las Casas which Henige is concerned to present: the passages that are offered as the words of the admiral himself. The matter is complicated. To begin with, it is not entirely clear how many passages fall into this category since Las Casas did not use quotation marks, though these are liberally supplied by most modern editors. Sometimes Las Casas reverts to the first person and sometimes he says a particular passage is “in the very words” of Columbus. However, in these instances comparison between the *diario* as we have it and the use that Las Casas made of his transcription of the *diario* in his *Historia de las Indias* reveals Las Casas’s interests and attitudes especially clearly, Henige argues. Henige quotes side by side Las Casas’s transcription of Columbus’s first account of the natives of Guanahani, a long passage which ends “All these are the words of the Admiral,” and the equivalent passage from the *Historia de las Indias*, which Las Casas introduces by saying “Who, in the book of his first navigation, which he wrote for the Catholic Monarchs, says in this way: ‘... ,’” and which ends “All these are the words of the Admiral.” In the *Historia de las Indias* Las Casas is, presumably, transcribing his own transcription, so Henige is using the example as a way of throwing light on Las Casas’s practices. Henige (1992:204) sums up the quality of Las Casas’s self-transcription:

In this passage (which happens to be one of the longest of the direct quotations in the *Historia*) Las Casas omitted words, added words, changed the form of words, added phrases, changed singulars to plurals as well as the converse, and changed a masculine form to a feminine. Some of these changes (e.g., omitting the “no” and making “nariz” feminine) corrected apparent errors of Columbus. Others were mistakes by Las Casas, while yet others constituted discretionary – and pointless – editorial tampering. Yet in a sense none of this is really the point. By claiming to be *quoting* Columbus, Las Casas automatically undertook the obligation to do just that rather than silently to emend that which he found wanting.

But these emendations are all relatively minor when compared with the fifty-four words that Las Casas eliminated from the middle of this “quotation”:

Yo vide algunos que tenían señales de feridas en sus cuerpos, y les hize señas qué era aquello, y ellos me amostraron cómo allí venían gente de otras islas que estaban acerca y los querían tomar y se defendían. Y yo creí, y creo, que aquí vienen de tierra firme a

tomarlos por captivos. (Quoted by Henige 1992:203; see pp. 194-95 above for translation; Henige's own translation has minor differences.)

Strictly speaking, the argument about the quality of Las Casas's transcription should require no explanation in order to make Henige's point about the care with which we need to treat historical sources. However, Henige does have an overarching explanatory thesis, one which takes us into the heart of debates about the anthropology of the native Caribbean. Las Casas is introduced on the third page of *In Search of Columbus* as "noted historian and advocate of the Indians." The year 1552 is supported as likely for the transcription:

It remains only to point out that a later date – say 1552, when Las Casas was in full rhetorical flight over the plight of the Indians – would encourage a wider range of arguments concerning the partisan uses to which he may have felt obliged to put the *diario*, beginning with its very transcription. (Henige 1991:22)

The passage analyzed is the first in the *Historia de las Indias* in which Las Casas quoted Columbus, a passage which, Henige (1992:202) says, "symptomatically" refers to Columbus's first impressions of the islanders of Guanahani. And Las Casas's blindness in the Indian cause is offered as explanation for the missing fifty-four words:

The notion of Indians' enslaving other Indians was of course anathema to Las Casas, who was prepared to countenance only the thought that slave raiding in the Caribbean was an innovation of the Spanish. He may well have thought that he had no choice but to allow the passage to disappear from its new context. Perhaps he even convinced himself that Columbus had been in error, despite his unwonted reiteration ('creí y creo'). (Henige 1992:204)

Henige is extremely scrupulous in the use he makes of the evidence adduced. He offers no anachronistic condemnation of Las Casas's practices: his criticism is quite properly directed at modern editors who have failed to address the issues. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which – to put it as carefully as possible – his characterization of Las Casas needs to be complemented if the terms of the political argument about the state of the native Caribbean in 1492 are to be transcended (and "native Caribbean" tends in this argument to stand for America itself).

Although Henige's case needs no explanatory hypothesis, the one he offers introduces a whole level of interpretation which, in the context where it arises, can only remain as speculation – but speculation which inevitably colors the otherwise neutral tones of the case. One phrase can make the point: "partisan uses to which he [Las Casas] may have felt obliged to put

the *diario*." If this were to be offered as a substantial argument, there are points that could be made against it. For one thing, if 1552 is taken as the date of transcription, then one has to imagine Las Casas transcribing the fifty-four words from target text to copy before omitting them soon afterwards when he transcribed his transcription into the *Historia de las Indias*. Why did he not simply omit the words from his first transcription, or paraphrase them in such a way as to suggest that Columbus was probably mistaken? Why leave the kind of hostage to fortune which enables Henige to suggest partisan usage? Are we to posit some kind of editorial consciousness which operated at stage one, but which Las Casas did not feel obliged by when composing a work in his own name? Or are we to see him as incompetently partisan, not bothering sufficiently to cover the traces of his offence? Then there is the question of just who is doing this "slave-raiding" in the Caribbean. It may well be that what Columbus had in mind were visits by the soldiers of the Great Khan, whose mainland cities he presumed were not far distant from the islands where he made landfall. The words of the Indians or, given the unlikelihood of efficient communication, the very wounds on their bodies or, to be absolutely scrupulous about this, Columbus's belief that he saw wounds on the Indians' bodies, offer no incontrovertible evidence at all about the nature of native Caribbean polities. Of course, Las Casas may well have mistakenly believed that it did, and may have acted accordingly to remove the statement from his transcription of the transcription. The problem with "partisan uses to which he may have felt obliged to put the *diario*" is that these difficult matters of reading and interpretation are glossed over, leaving an image of Las Casas, if not as a deliberate forger, then as someone acting under intense ideological pressure: "he may well have thought that he had no choice."

To generalize the point: the problem with Henige's suggestion (as opposed to the rigorous argumentation which characterizes book and articles) is that Las Casas is the only person involved who is designated "partisan." It would not be difficult to make an argument that Henige's sketch of Las Casas is in its own way deeply partisan inasmuch as it presents a strong image of Las Casas as someone who altered evidence to suit his own concern about the plight of the Indians – whereas, as Henige himself (1991:11-30, 65-101) points out, Las Casas's practices as editor were by modern standards at least in line with, if not considerably in advance of, his contemporaries, and by no means as reprehensible as those of modern editors.

More important, though, for my purposes here – and I do have purposes, even if they stop short of partisanship – is that what Henige says (and does not say) about the fifty-four words allows those words to pass unchallenged as evidence about the nature of the native Caribbean. It is no longer exactly

clear whose words they are since Columbus has been removed as effective author of the *diario* (and therefore presumably cannot be considered as partisan) and Las Casas has partisanly omitted the words from his *Historia*. The words are left as unauthored and neutral discourse, yet marked after the event of their composition as significant by Las Casas's partisan decision to omit them from his transcription of the transcription: they seem – as is implied by the use of a word like “symptomatically” – to tell an awkward truth that needs partisan denial in the interests of a rhetorical campaign about “the plight of the Indians.”

In the context of trying to make sense of the native Caribbean the complement to Henige's argument must be a demonstration of other forms of partisanship, made visible through textual analysis of the accounts left by those close to Columbus who offered “descriptions” of the people they found in the Caribbean.

NATIVE INHABITANTS

Just whom then did Columbus encounter in the Caribbean in 1492? The best of quincenary scholarship is in no doubt. This is Wim and Carla Phillips (1992:160): “We know the people he first encountered and described were Tainos, members of the widespread tribes of the Arawak language group that inhabited lands ranging from the Amazon through the Caribbean.”² And Irving Rouse, doyen of archaeologists of the Caribbean, calls his recent book, addressed to academics and “the interested public” (1992:xi): *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*. These are representative of many apparently simple statements now being made about the people Columbus met on his first voyage. Yet “Taino” is by no means a universally accepted denomination; it was certainly not the name this “people” called themselves; and there is increasing uncertainty as to the boundaries and nature of the group being referred to.

To start with, Taino is a word of relatively recent currency within English and is still not in popular usage: Michener, it will be noted, uses the more common “Arawak,” as does Fred Olsen (1974:3): “The friendly natives he encountered there he called Indians. Today we know they were Arawaks.” The standard English histories of the region still use Arawak (Parry and Sherlock 1956; Greenwood and Hamber 1979; Honychurch 1979; Claypole and Robottom 1980), as do some of the most recent scholarly works in various disciplines (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983:69-73; Parry and Keith, 1984, vol. 2: passim; Watts 1987:51-77; Greenblatt 1991:52-87). “Taino” is probably more established, it might be noted, in the Spanish-speaking

Caribbean (García Valdez 1930; Pichardo Moya 1956; Cassá 1974; López Baralt 1976; Fernández Méndez 1979). The terminological question is worth pursuing, if only because it opens up for inspection the apparently seamless simplicity of supposed ethnographic "observation" and "reportage" in this region.

The islanders Columbus encountered on his first voyage did not have a self-designation or, if they did, Columbus did not note it: he simply called them "indios," a term that was apparently sufficient for Spanish colonial bureaucracy and for the historians who wrote the first accounts of the Caribbean encounter: the absence of a proper name perhaps seemed emblematic of the islanders' state of lack, whether that lack was interpreted in a positive or negative sense.

The naming process began with the great nineteenth-century U.S. attempts to map the native continent. Daniel Brinton (1871) used the term Island Arawak because of presumed affiliations of descent and language with the Arawaks of the mainland, and ever since Arawak (sometimes modified by Island) has been the most popular term to designate the native islanders of the north and north-west Caribbean. Taino (first suggested as an ethnic marker by Rafinesque in 1836) seems then to have developed either as an alternative to Island Arawak (Fewkes 1904; Lovén 1935); or to refer specifically to the culture of the Greater Antillean islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico (Fewkes 1922). In the influential *Handbook of South American Indians*, edited by J.H. Steward (1948), Irving Rouse used Arawak as the general category for the area, which he then divided into five, based on "the linguistic and cultural differences recorded in the historic sources." The Taino were "the majority of the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and the eastern tip of Cuba." The people of Jamaica and central Cuba were referred to as Sub-Taino (1948a:521). Rouse later rejected the use of the unmodified term Arawak to refer to the native inhabitants of the islands (1974), and in his recent book (1992) he seems to use Taino in something like Lovén's sense, but now divides the region into Classic Taino (previously Taino), Western Taino (Sub-Taino), Lucayan Taino (Lucayan), and Ciguayan Taino (Ciguayan). An interesting new group also appears, called Eastern Taino. The Classic Taino are so called because they are the "most advanced culturally" (1992:7), a people who had "reached maturity" about 1200 AD (p. 169). On the fringes there are also "peripheral" groups (p. 5), in the west the Ciboney and in the east the Island-Carib, as Rouse calls them in distinction to the Carib "proper" of South America (p. 21).³ This is very much a Taino-centred view of the Caribbean, motivated by unstated assumptions about the nature of cultural development.

In the circumstances, the Phillipses' statement that the first people

Columbus encountered "were Tainos" seems at the very least an oversimplification which obscures the amount of intellectual effort expended by commentators to produce that designation as unproblematic. But the Philipses' sentence has further implications that need unpicking. "The people ... were Tainos": a singular group is posited. Again, Rouse's (1992:5) authoritative words seem to lend support: "The central group ... lacked an overall name in Columbus's time. Its members referred to themselves by the names of the localities in which they lived." Leaving aside both the telling verb "lack" (which here suggests a norm by which the islanders are judged inadequate), and the fact that Columbus's failure to report a name is not necessarily the same as the lack of a name, the crucial move in Rouse's sentence is the grammatical constitution of a "group" that his reported ethnographic evidence has failed to discover. "Its members": a plurality of localities is transformed into a singular people, despite the absence of any clear ethnic marker. However, Rouse does produce an ethnic marker of sorts, a negative self-identification which seems to justify the usage "Taino": "The group is called Taino, meaning 'good' or 'noble', because several of its members spoke that word to Columbus to indicate that they were not Island-Caribs" (1992:5; citing Alegría 1981). This seems to be the only basis for Rouse's use of Taino as an ethnic term (p. xi), and for his statement that the ethnic groups of Columbus's time "are defined by documentary evidence" (p. 108).⁴

In the literature of the first two voyages there are three occasions on which some version of the word *taino* appears. In the *diario* entry for December 23, 1492 Columbus recounts his struggle to come to terms with native words for parts of the social system in Hispaniola:

All of the Indians returned with the Christians to the village, which he affirms to be the largest and the best arranged with streets than any other of those passed through and found up to that time. The town, he says, is in the direction of the Punta Santa almost three leagues southeast, and since the canoes go fast with oars, they went ahead to let the cacique, as they call him there, know. Until then the Admiral had not been able to understand whether cacique meant king or governor. They also use another name for an important person, whom they call *nitayno*. He does not know if they say it for noble, or governor, or judge. Finally the cacique came to them and the whole town, more than two thousand persons, gathered in the plaza, which was very well swept. This king was very courteous to the people from the ships, and each of the common people brought them something to eat and drink. Afterward the king gave to each one some of the pieces of cotton cloth that the women wear, and parrots for the Admiral, and certain pieces of gold. (Columbus 1989:271)

Even a superficial reading would suggest that what Las Casas is here summarizing is Columbus's attempt to match native terminology with social divisions that make some sense to European eyes. He succeeds after a

fashion. By the end of the passage *cacique* has been assimilated to king (to whom information goes, who is courteous to strangers, and who gives gifts); there are common people (who need no name and who serve food and drink); and there is an intermediate level of important people called *nitaynos* who seem to be the equivalent of European "nobles." There are no ethnic markers here. For this reason Carl Sauer (1966:37) rejected the use of Taino as "a term introduced in the present century and taken casually from the name for a single social class."

On the second voyage to the Caribbean, Columbus and his fleet made landfall in the Lesser Antilles at the islands of Marie Galante and Dominica before sailing north to Guadeloupe. This is the report of the ships' physician Dr. Diego Álvarez Chanca, in a letter written for the municipality of Seville:

On this first day that we landed there, many men and women walked along the shore next to the water looking at the fleet and marvelling at something so novel. And when a boat came to land to speak with them, saying to them *taino, taino*, which means "good", they waited as long as they [they sailors] did not leave the water, staying near it, so that when they wished they could escape. (Translated in Hulme & Whitehead 1992:33; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:159)

The repeated "they" is confusing and the "saying" hangs unattached, but translators seem to agree that the word *taino* is spoken here by Columbus's sailors, not by the islanders who greeted them with circumspection (Columbus 1988:134; Chanca 1984:78). The exchange clearly leaves considerable room for interpretation – and I will return to this encounter on Guadeloupe later in the essay. The sailors may after all simply have been mumbling the one word they knew in a native Caribbean language. Perhaps the most likely explanation, however, is that they were indicating to the "common people" on the shore that they were *taino* from another place and therefore due a certain deference: in other words the Spaniards were explaining as best they could how they fitted (or rather perceived themselves as fitting) into the local social system. If *taino* was being used here as an ethnic marker, then it was being used by the Spanish sailors to indicate that they were "not Island Carib." But since, as Chanca says, "we suspected that the islands were those of *Caribe*" (p. 32), claiming to be *taino* would not be a clever way of introducing oneself. If, on the other hand, the islands were not "those of *Caribe*," then the walkers on the shore were hardly going to be convinced by a positive claim to belong to the same ethnic group as themselves. In any case, if ethnicity is involved at all, then it can only be that the *Spaniards* were intending to describe themselves as "not Carib": the example gives no evidence at all of self-identification.

The third example of the use of *taino* comes from the Italian humanist

Peter Martyr D'Anghera's (1587:20) account of an incident later on the second voyage when Melchior Maldonado is exploring the coast of Hispaniola and comes upon what seems to be a fine harbor on the shores of a major estuary:

In the course of their explorations of this country the Spaniards perceived in the distance a large house, which they approached, persuaded that it was the retreat of Guaccanarillo. They were met by a man with a wrinkled forehead and frowning brows, who was escorted by about a hundred warriors armed with bows and arrows, pointed lances and clubs. He advanced menacingly towards them. "Tainos," the natives cried, that is to say, good men and not cannibals [*id est, nobiles esse, non Canibales*]. In response to our amicable signs, they dropped their arms and modified their ferocious attitude. To each one was presented a hawk's bell, they became so friendly that they fearlessly went on board the ships, sliding down the steep banks of the river, and overwhelmed our compatriots with gifts. (English translation in D'Anghera 1912, 1:81; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:60)

Peter Martyr, of course, is not an eyewitness, and it is impossible to reconstruct in detail the discursive sequence that connects the original witness to this event to the narrative that survives here. Enough does survive, however, in the various narratives of the second voyage, to comprehend something of the complexity of the political process on Hispaniola in the weeks following the Spaniards' return. Guacanagari (here Guaccanarillo), the *cacique* who helped Columbus after the shipwreck of the *Santa María* and who probably thought that he would never see the Spaniards again, has – so the sources suggest – been behaving suspiciously in the course of his claims of innocence in the disappearance and presumed death of the men that Columbus had left behind on Hispaniola. Guacanagari's story is that the Spaniards were killed during a raid by the neighboring *cacique*, Caonabó; and Guacanagari supposedly carries a wound from this raid, implicit evidence of his brave but futile defense of the Spaniards left in his care. Melchior Maldonado was sent by Columbus to inspect Guacanagari's wound and reported that when the bandage was untied he had seen neither wound nor scar ("ni herida ni cicatriz alguna" [p. 58]), though the *cacique* had indeed been lying in bed *seemingly* ill, surrounded by the beds of his seven concubines. In Peter Martyr's report Maldonado is clearly unimpressed by the genuineness of Guacanagari's injury. Maldonado is supposed to have hidden his suspicions. However one might assume that his arrival on a neighboring part of the coast would be likely to cause some dismay: was this Spaniard a friend of Guacanagari? Did he know what Guacanagari's part (if any) was in the death of the Spaniards? Was he here on reprisal or to make friends? These questions, or questions like them, would have been relevant to the interchange that followed and that is reported, second- or third-hand, by Peter Martyr. The

native cry of *taino*, even if we assume it correctly recorded, was not an innocent and unmotivated self-identification, it was a tactical move within a desperate game. Judged by the actions which accompanied it, the islanders were trying to cover all options and were grateful when the dangerous strangers did not want to fight.

The word *taino*, spoken in this context, is open to many interpretations. The islanders accompanying the *cacique* may have presumed that they were safe if they claimed a relationship to him which would be established by that word. They may have been asserting some kind of class solidarity with the new arrivals. They may have heard reports that the visitors, for whatever reason, referred to themselves in that way, and so sought to "recognize" and welcome them with the use of the appropriate identifier. In the circumstances the important thing is that "and not cannibals" is recognized as a gloss, possibly Columbus's own, certainly belonging to the "official" interpretation of the second voyage to which both Chanca and Peter Martyr contributed. There is nothing in Martyr's sentences, any more than in the other two examples, on which *taino* can rest as an ethnic identifier.⁵

CANNIBALISM AND ITS REPORTERS

The Phillipses (1992:196) draw a sharp contrast between Columbus's hyperbolic accounts of the wonders of the Caribbean and the "firsthand, hard-headed testimony" of people like Diego Álvarez Chanca, the physician from Seville, and Michele de Cuneo, Columbus's friend from Savona. The letters of Chanca and Cuneo are offered as "valuable correctives" to Columbus's "overblown descriptions": "Unlike Columbus, they had no reason to embellish what they saw."

The Phillipses' account (1992:196-97) of the opening days of Columbus's second voyage through the islands of the Caribbean is taken entirely from Chanca:

Chanca's first description of a deserted village on the island named Santa María la Galante reported the discovery of human arm and leg bones in the houses, presumably the remains of a cannibal feast. Later, on Guadelupe, an island christened when the fleet arrived on November 4. Dr. Chanca reported the seizure of a number of Caribs and their captives, who fled to the Europeans for deliverance from the Caribs. The women captives were especially grateful to be rescued and secretly told the Europeans which of the islanders were Caribs and which were not. After this incident, Chanca and the other commentators began drawing a distinction between the Caribs, or cannibals, and the "*Indians*," who were not cannibals and feared the Caribs. From then on, some of the complexity of New World societies began to color their narratives.

Chanca was horrified by what he and his colleagues learned from the women they

rescued. He described the Caribs as “*bestial*” and indicted their treatment of conquered peoples ... Chanca’s matter-of-fact reporting of these horrors leaves little doubt of their authenticity.

The authors add a note referring to two other accounts of cannibalism described by participants on the second voyage, and continue (p. 295, n.21):

The existence of cannibalism in pre-1492 America is accepted by many historians and social scientists. Some anthropologists and literary critics suggest that it existed only in the minds of the Europeans ... To deny that cannibalism existed, one needs to assume that a wide range of European commentators simply made up the stories, an interpretation that defies reason, logic, and the available evidence.⁶

It might be noted how the Phillipses’ rhetoric works in this passage. The disciplinary division between “historians and social scientists” on the one hand and “anthropologists and literary critics” on the other (further inflected by *many* of the first group as opposed to *some* of the second) repeats the contrast between the “hardheaded” testimony of Chanca and Cuneo and the “overblown” descriptions of Columbus. Historians and social scientists, like Chanca and Cuneo, are not interested in “embellishments”: they will just stick to the evidence made available through “matter-of-fact reporting.” Reason and logic demand this approach. And once reason and logic have been followed, Dr. Chanca is seen as having provided incontrovertible evidence of cannibalism in the Caribbean islands.

We are fortunate enough to have a detailed study of what is known about Dr. Chanca and his letter, written by Consuelo Varela (1985), one of the leading Spanish experts on Columbian and related documentation. All in all, the Phillipses would seem to gain substantial support for their position from Varela’s article. For a start Chanca emerges well from her formidably detailed comparison of the various surviving accounts of the second voyage. Nothing Chanca says is contradicted by the other reports, but neither is his account weighed down by the comparisons that mark those by Peter Martyr and Guillermo Coma, who are always referring everything to Virgil or Ovid – embellishing their texts with unnecessary humanism; nor indeed was Dr. Chanca’s letter even written with a view to publication or wide dissemination. For Varela, this clearly gives the text a special status. Chanca’s credibility is absolute, she says (p. 29): his letter genuinely presents “*primeras impresiones*” [first impressions] (p. 21). She calls it a “*relación ... sin propósito de historiar acontecimientos*” [an account which does not aim to put events into a history] (p. 29) with the clear implication that Chanca’s lack of interest in giving any pattern or interpretation to the events he relates and the impressions he gains, makes him an especially reliable witness. He had

no axe to grind. He presents, Varela says, “un texto fresco y limpio,” a fresh and clean text.

However, there is also evidence in Varela’s article less conducive to the Phillipses’ argument. She makes the point that the second voyage is known to us exclusively through sources that are basically well-disposed towards Columbus, the only possible exception being the Savonese Michele de Cuneo, who was Columbus’s friend but who had a very individualistic take on what he saw. Chanca personifies this general warmth towards the admiral, even suggesting that Columbus had picked the perfect spot on which to found the city of Isabella – and not even his best friends thought that Columbus had a good eye when it came to choosing spots for founding cities. This attitude may not, Varela suggests, be unconnected with the fact that Chanca knew that the ship carrying his letter to Spain also carried a letter from Columbus to the King and Queen requesting a substantial increase in Chanca’s salary (which was eventually granted). In other words, the existence of Columbus’s letter begins to undermine that difference between Columbus and Chanca which the Phillipses are concerned to erect as a way of validating Chanca’s testimony. It suggests a relationship that is in fact borne out by textual evidence.

Dr. Chanca’s testimony may be “unembellished,” but it is not quite as straightforward as the Phillipses make out. Chanca does not describe a village on Marie-Galante at all, let alone the discovery there of human arm and leg bones. They presumably refer to the incident that took place on Guadeloupe:

When we came near, the admiral ordered a light caravel to coast along looking for a harbour. It went ahead and having reached land, sighted some houses. The captain went ashore in the boat and reached the houses, in which he found their inhabitants. As soon as they saw them [our men] they took to flight, and he entered the houses and found the things that they had, for they had taken nothing away, and from there he took two parrots, very large and very different from all those seen before. He found much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and articles of food; and he brought away a little of everything; especially he brought away four or five bones of the arms and legs of men. When we saw this, we suspected that the islands were those islands of *Caribe*, which are inhabited by people who eat human flesh. For the admiral, in accordance with the indications as to the situation of those islands which the indians of the islands which they had previously discovered had given to him on the former voyage, had directed his course to discover them, because they were nearer to Spain and also because from there lay the direct route by which to come to Española, where he had left people before. To these islands, by the goodness of God and by the good judgment of the Admiral, we came as directly as if we had been sailing on a known and well-followed route. (Translated in Hulme & Whitehead 1992:32; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:158)

Columbus’s navigational skills (perhaps aided by the returning Lucayans)

allowed him to take up his exploration of the Caribbean islands almost exactly where he had left off earlier in 1493. This is an important point, because it contextualizes Chanca's position as supposed hardheaded eyewitness. The plan, to which Chanca is clearly privy, is to begin the second exploration at the point where the first had had to be broken off, leaving unvisited the islands supposedly inhabited by "caribes" and supposedly the site of major supplies of gold (cf. Hulme 1986:39-43). The working assumption already is that the second expedition has arrived at these islands: the sight of four or five human bones is enough to confirm the suspicion "that the islands were those islands of *Caribe*, which are inhabited by people who eat human flesh." However, the end of the Phillipses' first sentence is distinctly ambiguous – and shows how unstraightforward "hardheaded" reporting can be. To begin with, what Chanca offers is not a description at all: he was not a member of the landing-party. He reports second-hand what was told to him, probably by the captain of the caravel. "Presumably the remains of a cannibal feast" may be the Phillipses' gloss on Chanca's reportage or it may be intended to correspond to Chanca's words "we suspected that ..." In neither case, however, do the bones provide evidence which in some unproblematic way speaks for itself: as Washington Irving ([1828]1981:192) pointed out, nearly 170 years ago, when bones were found in native dwellings on Hispaniola they were regarded as relics of the deceased, preserved through reverence, but when found amongst the presumed Caribs they were looked upon with horror as proof of cannibalism. In any case, Chanca had not been on the first voyage, so he himself had no expectations, let alone any knowledge. "We suspected that ..." can only refer to a collective view promulgated principally by Columbus himself as source of authority and as main conduit of information and opinion between first voyage and second. (Again the role of the native captives returning to the Caribbean is difficult to assess, though possibly quite important.) The division that the Phillipses want to erect between Columbus and Chanca falls at the first hurdle: in writing this sentence Chanca places himself grammatically, through his use of the first-person plural, within the "official version" propounded by Columbus. In no way can he be seen as an "independent" or "fresh" witness.

Chanca's next supposed "report," according to the Phillipses, is of "the seizure of a number of Caribs and their captives, who fled to the Europeans for deliverance from the Caribs. The women captives were especially grateful to be rescued and secretly told the Europeans which of the islanders were Caribs and which were not." These are Chanca's words:

[O]n the seashore there were some small settlements, and as soon as they saw the sails, they all ran away. Having gone two leagues, we found a harbour and that very late. That

night the admiral decided that at daybreak some should go to speak with them and to find out what people they were, despite the suspicion felt and [the fact that] those who had already been seen running away were naked people like the others whom the admiral had already seen on the earlier voyage.

That morning certain captains set out; some returned at the hour of eating and brought a boy of about 14, as was afterwards learned, and he said that he was one of those whom these people held captive. The others divided up. Some took a small boy, whom a man was leading by the hand and deserted in order to flee. They then sent him with some of them; others remained and of these some took certain women, natives of the island, and other women who were amongst the prisoners, who came willingly. (Translated in Hulme & Whitehead 1992:32; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:158-59)

He reports the speaking of the word *taino* (quoted earlier) and the circum-spection of the walkers on the shore:

The result was that none of the men could be taken by force nor willingly, except two who felt confident and who were afterwards taken by force. More than twenty women of the captives were taken, and other native women of the island came of their own accord and were captured and taken by force. Some boys, captives, came to us, fleeing from the natives of the island who held them captive.

We were in this harbour eight days, because of the loss of the above-mentioned captain, and we often went on land, going about their dwellings and villages which were on the coast, finding an infinite number of men's bones and skulls hung up about the houses like vessels to hold things. Not many men appeared here, the reason being, according to what the women told us, that ten canoes had gone with people to raid other islands. These people seemed to us more polished than those who live in the other islands which we have seen, although they all have dwellings of straw, but these have them much better made and better provided with supplies, and there seems to be in them more industry, both male and female. They had much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and many cotton cloths, so well made that they lose nothing by comparison with those of our own country.

We asked the women who were captive on this island what these people were; they replied that they were *caribes*. After they understood that we hated those people for their evil custom of eating the flesh of men, they rejoiced greatly, and if after that they brought any woman or man of the *caribes*, they said secretly that they were *caribes*, for even here where all were in our power they went in fear of them, like subjugated people; and so we found out which of the women were *caribes* and which not, for the *caribe* women wear two rings made of cotton on each leg, one near the knee and the other near the ankle, so that the calves are made large and the places mentioned very constricted, and it seems to me that they regard this as something graceful; so, by this difference we know the ones from the others. (Translated in Hulme & Whitehead 1992:33; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:158)

The lengthy quotation is necessary to demonstrate just how complex this "hardheaded" firsthand testimony really is.

The first impression offered is of "naked people like the others whom the admiral had already seen on the earlier voyage," a supremely clear example of a statement that is only superficially that of an "eyewitness" since the

comparison it makes is completely dependent on the information supplied by the admiral. If this comparison is offered as supporting evidence for the suspicion that these are the islands of *Caribe* (which is what the context suggests, although the words themselves are not entirely clear), then the reference is to the “naked people” encountered towards the end of Columbus’s first voyage, whom he was convinced were the “Caribs” he had heard about, on account of their less than welcoming manner.⁷ And, whereas the “docile” natives of Guanahani had approached the strangers without fear, these supposedly “fearless” inhabitants run away, an action rather unconvincingly “explained” by Peter Martyr:

... when they saw our men, these savages, whether because they were afraid or because they were conscious of their crimes, looked at one another, making a low murmur, and then, suddenly forming into a wedge-shaped group, they fled swiftly, like a flock of birds, into the shady valleys. (D’Anghera 1587:12; English in D’Anghera 1912, I:73; Spanish in Gil & Varela 1984:53)

Of the people the Spaniards actually succeed in making contact with, some are boys, who flee from the natives holding them captive, some are native women, some of whom are captured, and some are women prisoners, some of whom “came willingly” – and are “taken.” Not many men are seen; indeed it is not entirely clear just how “captive” these prisoners are, given the absence of probable captors. Although this is all supposed to constitute the eyewitness testimony on which Chanca bases his general account of Carib life, he has not, it turns out, actually seen many Caribs at all. The last paragraph of the quotation certainly suggests that “eyewitness” reports are actually interpretations of accounts given by “the women who were captive on the island.”⁸ As “native informants” these women can hardly be assumed to have been neutral witnesses: leaving aside the absence of a common language, captives are *prima facie* unlikely to think highly of their captors and, more pertinent still, the women had exchanged one captivity for another (“more than twenty women of the captives were taken”), and might be presumed to have said what they took their new captors to want them to say; and these new captors quickly made clear their hatred for the “natives of the island,” however few of them were actually around to hate. The Phillipses’ construction of all this as “fled to the Europeans for deliverance” is at best a tendentious reading in which the women’s gratitude is produced by the interpreters (the words are “rejoiced greatly,” which is rather different) in order to motivate the “secret telling” which provides the Europeans with the supposed “truth” of native ethnic identities.⁹ It is indeed the case, as the Phillipses say, that after this incident Chanca and other commentators began drawing a distinction between “Caribs” and other “Indians.” That

this indicates the "coloring" of Spanish narratives by the complexity of New World societies remains less clear.

It might finally be noted, in dealing with this passage from Chanca, that although according to the accepted story the Caribs are less "settled" and "developed" than their neighbors, Chanca's account has them with better-made houses, better supplies, more industry, and describes them as more polished ["pulfítica"]; though once again, since these are the first islanders he has seen, the comparison cannot be his. This ethnographic surplus should problematize the anthropological explanation which Chanca and his commentators give, and which becomes the "official" version; yet it is rarely mentioned.¹⁰

What the Spaniards seem to want, a desire evident in Columbus's original misidentification of the Ciguayo on his first voyage and glimpsed in his comparison reported here by Chanca, is to be able to identify a group called "los de *Caribe*" whom they think, rightly or wrongly, that they have had reported to them as fierce enemies of the "indios" with whom they have established friendly relations. The desire is to be able to see at a glance whom their presumed enemies are, a desire perhaps for the martial symbolism of European conflict; a desire frustrated by the "nakedness" of all native bodies. What comes over most strongly from Chanca's account of the days on Guadeloupe is a situation of great fluidity, political rather than ethnic perhaps, on which Chanca attempts to impose a rigidly dualistic order. Hence the almost evident relief when the captive women reveal the presence of a symbol that supposedly facilitates immediate identification, at least of Carib women.

This assumption of the *visibility* of "Caribness" quickly becomes one of the constitutive aspects of the discourse. Peter Martyr tells the story of an unprovoked Spanish attack near Nevis on an Indian canoe carrying several men and women. The Indians defend themselves with great bravery despite being outnumbered, but are eventually taken prisoner and shipped to Spain as slaves, where Martyr himself saw them:

There was no one who saw them who did not shiver with horror, so infernal and repugnant was the aspect nature and their own cruel character had given them. I affirm this after what I have myself seen, and so likewise do all those who went with me in Medina to examine them.¹¹

A long history of ethnographic description is prefigured here. "Nature" is taken to explain "aspect": cruelty is immediately translated into a set of visible features. Ambush, the struggle for life, capture, transportation, and the chains of the slave-market are mere circumstances, not worthy of attention when it comes to understanding bearing and expression. With hind-

sight, it might be thought that in many ways the little huddle of shivering humanists brave enough to "examine" the infernal natives behind the bars of a slave market says more about European attitudes than it does about the ethnic identity or cultural belonging of this set of Caribbean islanders.¹²

What is really at issue here, and why I spend so long taking apart these relatively few sentences, is the unwarranted assumption that European accounts can be read as straightforward "evidence" of a native Caribbean "reality." Chanca's report and Martyr's letters demonstrate that the "eyes" of European witnesses saw through lenses already colored by certain expectations, and that the Spanish entry into a Caribbean political situation of some complexity had an immediate and quite drastic effect on the state of affairs under description, introducing another player, of obvious power if markedly ignorant, whose presence and actions had immediately to be factored into all native calculations, responses, and words.

When Columbus first sees the wounds on native bodies his interpretation of this "evidence" is that these islands are used as slave-grounds by the Great Khan of Cathay who sends his soldiers on raids; an interpretation which both indicates Columbus's ever-imaginative willingness to prove the proximity of China, and offers a chilling foretaste of the use to which Columbus and his followers would put the Bahamian islands. The first time Columbus hears of the *canibales* who are supposed to inhabit the large island to the east of Cuba he presumes that they are these soldiers of the Great Khan who come to capture the natives: "because they did not return to their own lands they would say that they ate them" (1989:167). Since the aggressors are reported to be well-armed, Columbus assumes they are "people of intelligence." From this moment the power relationships within Spanish ideology are determined: the *canibales*, whoever they are, will be displaced as slave-traders in the area. As the Great Khan story loses feasibility, so the world-picture of the Hispaniolan *caciques* is adopted, cannibals and all; although adopted only because of the temporary alliances it facilitates. The Spaniards imposed the distinctions that interested them, between the amenable natives and the intractable, as an aspect of their decision to use the worldview of the *caciques* and *nitayno* of Hispaniola (such as they understood it) as their bridgehead into native politics (Whitehead 1992b:6). Modern scholarship has established ethnic identities on the shifting sands of these immediate and inconstant political alliances. The passages from Chanca are indeed rich in "evidence" about the disposition of native Caribbean culture in 1493, but the challenge is to read them with new attention: they do not simply "speak" their truths to us across five hundred years, despite simplistic attempts to persuade us otherwise.¹³

CONCLUSION

The thrust of my argument in this article has been that the sense made of the native Caribbean over the last five hundred years has been deeply colored by the ideological motivations of the early European colonists, whose primary concern was in distinguishing between "friendly" and "hostile" natives, but whose self-interested categorizations have provided a long-lasting if insecure foundation for the ethnographic descriptions and anthropological theories that slowly developed in their wake. Fully in the spirit of David Henige's exemplary work I have tried in a small way to burn away a few of the cornerstones of this established picture in the sceptical acid of textual analysis. This work of critique is, to my mind, an integral and indeed the primary step in any historiographic enterprise; nevertheless I want to end by at least sketching a direction for future work, which might eventually lead to the emergence of a different and more accurate picture of the native Caribbean, one less mired in the paradigms of colonial domination and less reflective of unacknowledged colonial anxieties.

The fundamental starting point for such work has to be the twin recognition that the native Caribbean has a history and that since 1492 that history has been inextricably intertwined with the colonial history of the European powers that invaded the area in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The current dualistic image of native Caribbean societies seems on the surface to offer two opposed notions of primordial Caribbean culture. In the first case the continuity with early accounts is obvious enough: the humanist Golden Age described in Peter Martyr's account of native Hispaniola is still discernible in contemporary accounts of the Taino, powerful witness to the unchanging ideals of middle-aged academics:

They enjoyed considerable leisure, given over to dancing, singing, ballgames, and sex, and expressed themselves artistically in basketry, woodworking, pottery, and jewelry. They lived in general harmony and peace, without greed or covetousness or theft.
(Sale 1991:101)

Against this "soft-headed" approach a seemingly opposed view, represented in its scholarly and popular wings by Rouse and Michener, promulgates a native Caribbean already marked by native violence, and constructs a narrative which is taken to explain the configuration of native polities that Columbus encountered in 1492. In fact, however, the two stereotypes are mutually supporting, two faces of the same coin, a counterfeit fantasy forged in the crucible of colonial expansion and offering little purchase on the actual history of the region.

To write Caribbean history before 1492 is obviously a fraught endeavour, depending largely on the hypothetical interpretation of archaeological evidence and on the careful reading of early colonial documentation. It is a sad comment on the investment still shown in the colonial stereotypes that the only recent full-scale (and extremely "hard-headed") reconstruction of the economic and class dynamics of "Taino" society (Moscoso 1986) should have been ignored by quincentenary scholarship.

To write Caribbean history after 1492 involves developing a vocabulary appropriate to the complex processes of cultural interaction within what has recently and appropriately been called "the tribal zone" (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992).¹⁴ Let me give one brief example. The suggestion implicit in my reading of Dr. Chanca's letter is that Columbus and his close colleagues were involved in what can be called an "invention of the Caribs" during the first two Spanish voyages to the Caribbean, an invention which may or may not have owed something to perceptions internal to the Caribbean polities encountered in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Hispaniola, but which certainly served as a discursive self-placement: Spain's self-appointed task, according to this understanding, was to identify and replace the Caribs as the dominant power in the region. To some extent that self-placement foundered on its misperception of Caribbean realities. The *caciques* of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico constituted the dominant powers in the region. It was them the Spaniards had to replace in a series of brutal engagements which involved some of the worst atrocities of early colonial history. The people of the *cacicazgos* demonstrated in these years their undoubted martial qualities, which has not prevented them from going down in history as the "gentle" and "peaceful" natives that Columbus had first described, so effective has been their "feminization" in colonial and subsequent scholarship (for analysis: see Moscoso 1989 and Hulme 1990).

In another sense, though, that "invention" proved remarkably successful: colonial discourse may misrecognize, but it also has the power to call its categories into being. Later descriptions, such as those provided by the French missionaries operating in the Lesser Antilles in the seventeenth century, may well have reflected changes in native society induced as the consequence of Spanish colonial policy, serving only then to reconfirm the initial discrimination and definition of the Spanish colonizers (Whitehead 1992b:2). Put more positively, the dispersal of the remnants of the native Caribbean cultures that had been socially and politically devastated by the colonial encounter and its consequences, clearly resisted and responded to those consequences in innovative ways, leading to the emergence of new ethnic units that would challenge European hegemony and eventually carve for themselves a place in modern history (Sued Badillo 1992a:2). It may well

be in this history of resistance and response that "the Caribs" find their proper place, after the fact of their invention. Writing this history is still a task for the future.

One debilitating consequence of the way in which the native Caribbean has been locked into an "ethnographic present" of 1492, divorced from five-hundred years of turbulent history, has been that the present native population has usually been ignored: some seemingly authoritative accounts of the region even appear written in ignorance of the very existence of such a population, let alone its role in colonial wars (Deagan 1990:231). Nonetheless, a native population does survive and is now contemporary with and conscious of the accounts written about its early history. At present, its primary concern may well be with the consequences of the European single market for the banana-growing that has recently supplied its economic subsistence but it has also been actively involved in the historic meetings of native American groups from all over the continent, planning their response to any thoughtless "celebrations" of the quincentenary. Over the last century the sense that has been made of the Caribbean has at best paid lip-service to the Dominican Caribs as the final remnant of their supposedly dying race. The quincentenary and its associated events may well have raised their own consciousness of their place in history to a level which will mean that future sense will at least need to take account of native Caribbean contributions to the historiography of the native Caribbean (see Frederick 1982; and cf. Gregoire & Canem 1989).

NOTES

1. This paper was given at the conference "Transatlantic Encounters: The 'Discovery' of the New World and the Old." held at Vanderbilt University on October 8-10, 1992. Thanks are due to Marshall Eakin and Vivien Green Fryd for their invitation, to the participants in that conference, and to Neil Whitehead, Gesa Mackenthun, Jalil Sued Badillo, Patricia Seed, and David Henige for their comments.
2. William and Carla Phillips' *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (1992) is one of the better quincentenary volumes: I choose it here to demonstrate how certain assumptions about how to make sense of the native Caribbean are embedded in writing and scholarship of the highest order.
3. According to Irving Rouse (1992:21) there is no Island-Carib name problem because they "called themselves" Carib. Rouse (p. 25) accepts the traditional story of Carib "invaders ... penetrating" the Caribbean - very much along the lines reflected in Michener's chapter - because of the Island-Caribs' own origin traditions vouched for by ethnohistorians (p. 131). On the vexed question of "caribe/caniba" see Hulme & Whitehead 1992:1-6 and Whitehead 1992a.
4. This "authorized version" of the origin of the name is often repeated as a self-evident truth: for instance, Loida Figueroa (1972:44 n.21) tells it in her history of Puerto Rico; Stevens-

Arroyo quotes Figueroa (1988:x). Samuel Wilson (1990:2) states simply, but without evidential basis, "These people called themselves *Taino*, from a root word meaning 'noble' or 'prudent,'" and references Arron (1975) – who gives the meaning of the word but says nothing about it as an ethnic marker.

5. Hernández Aquino (1977:391-92) is precise and accurate: "TAÍNO. (Tamb. Tayno.) Vocablo derivado de nitayno – los principales; los buenos -, voz esta última aprendida por los marinos españoles en el primer viaje del descubrimiento de América, y la cual usaron los acompañantes del Almirante don Cristóbal Colón en su segundo viaje a las Indias, al venir en relación con los habitantes de Guadalupe. El vocablo se aplicó más tarde a los moradores de las Antillas Mayores y luego pasó como patronímico a la etnología americana." On the place of the *nitayno* within the indigenous social structure, see Moscoso 1986:325-27.

6. Native Caribbean "cannibalism" has been much discussed recently, and I am not going to add to that debate here except to say that a careful analysis of the historical circumstances and ideological assumptions of its "reporters" is not exactly the same as claiming that they "made up the stories." For recent scepticism towards "the available evidence", see Hulme 1986:78-87; Sued Badillo 1978, 1992a and 1992b; Whitehead 1984; Myers 1984; Patterson 1991.

7. This is a reference to the incident towards the end of the first voyage when a fight breaks out between some Indians and a handful of sailors: Columbus (1989:335) judges from the appearance of the Indians – long hair, face tinted black, "that they were people from Carib and that they would eat men." These "Ciguayo" (as they are now usually referred to) remain within the early ethnographic record as something of an anomaly, falling clearly inside what was soon defined as the "Arawak" sphere of influence and therefore having to be explained as an advance raiding party or the result of some dynastic manoeuvring in order to accommodate Columbus's supposed "recognition" of their ethnic difference. If this did show the extent of Carib "advance", the argument went, then Carib bases must have existed on Puerto Rico or nearby. Gradually, however, in the light of archaeological and historical evidence, the "frontier" between Taino and Carib has been pushed east and south: compare, for example, the maps in Rouse's contributions to the *Handbook of South American Indians* (Rouse 1984c:498) where the boundary is between Vieques and St. Croix with the *The Tainos* where the boundary has been pushed back to between Montserrat and Guadeloupe (Rouse 1992:8). This moving frontier has created a space for which the new notion of "Eastern Taino" has had to be invented (see above p. 200). Cf. Figueredo 1978 and Allaire 1987.

8. The language of chivalry provides the script through which the Spaniards insert themselves into the political process of the native Caribbean as protectors of the women and enemies of the *Canibales*. One of the complexities engendered by this mode of insertion is the degree of unconscious identification between the Spaniards and the other "masculine" element within the discourse (see Hulme 1990).

9. This is an early example of a significant trope in ethnographic writing: cf. the analysis in Derrida 1976:113-15.

10. For this distinction between ethnography and anthropology, see Whitehead 1992b.

11. D'Anghera 1587:15; English in D'Anghera 1912, I:75-76 [amended]; Spanish in Gil & Varela, 1984:55; Chanca tells the same story, see Gil & Varela 1984:162.

12. There is a direct connection between Peter Martyr's occlusion of the circumstances in which he witnesses Carib "aspect" and the kind of description in the *Handbook of South American Indians* that can say of the Caribs: "When at ease they tended to be melancholy; when aroused they became truculent and vindictive" (Rouse 1948b:549). In both cases the context of the description disappears under the tyranny of the ethnographic verb "to be": the

colonial history of slave-raiding, massacre, and attempted extirpation are as nothing to the authoritative tone in which scientific discourse dissects "being." Rouse points out that his account deals with 1650 to 1700, but it never seems to occur to him that Carib behavior might in any way have been affected by two hundred years of intermittent fighting against a variety of European powers with designs on their land. The "truculence" is never itself interrogated.

13. Recent years have produced what will surely prove to be the beginning of a series of major re-readings of early colonial texts in which textual scholarship of the highest order is combined with historically-informed and theoretically-aware analysis: eg. Seed 1990; Adorno 1992; Mig-nolo 1992; cf. Henige & Zamora 1989. What needs adding to this work is the perception produced by recent anthropological theory that the confusions in attempts to represent "other" cultures tend to reveal at least as much about the unconscious self-definition of those doing the representing as they do about those supposedly represented (cf. Clifford 1988). Some recognition is needed that work in this area is no less "scientific," and no less concerned with real historical processes, than positivistic historiography, so often revealed in recent years as naive in its understanding of what it constitutes as evidence.

14. The relevant vocabulary of the "tribal zone" involves terms such as "ethnic soldiering," "secondary tribalization," and "polyethnicity" (see also Haas 1990). The beginnings of a Caribbean history alert to these questions can be found in the work of Jalil Sued Badillo (1978, 1986, 1992a, 1992b). Examples of other important recent work pertaining to the native Caribbean are Keegan 1989; Davis & Goodwin 1990; Boucher 1992; Whitehead 1992a. Rouse's own work has changed over the last few years, becoming much more amenable to the idea of local developments as explaining cultural change (1986:106; 1989:391); recognizing the Island-Caribs as a "problem" (1992:131); and noting the use by Columbus and the colonial authorities of the term "Carib" as a synonym for "hostile" (1992:155, 157).

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