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John Gilmore on Olaudah Equiano

Jeremy Taylor on Rabindranath  
Maharaj's *A Perfect Pledge*

Edward Baugh on  
Lorna Goodison

Annie Paul on John Hearne's  
*Voices Under the Window*

Tracy Assing on  
*Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs*

Stewart Brown on Martin Carter

# With a Carib eye

By Tracy Assing

**Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs: (Post) Colonial Representations of Aboriginality in Trinidad and Tobago**, by Maximilian C. Forte (University Press of Florida, ISBN 0-8130-2828-0, 283 pp)

When Christopher Columbus and his men, sailing off the southern coast of the island once known as Iere, caught sight of three mountain peaks and for reasons tied to their Christianity decided to rename the island "Trinidad", and claim it for Spain on 31 July, 1498, the island was already inhabited.

Historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists agree there were several tribes living there. In his *History of the Island of Trinidad under the Spanish Government*, the 19th-century historian Pierre Gustave Louis Borde wrote:

While the other islands of the Antilles, even the largest, were inhabited by only one or two, or at most, three Indian tribes, Trinidad had an agglomeration of the greater part of those found on the neighbouring continent with a radius of more than two hundred and fifty miles. These tribes it seemed, flocked to the Island, as much as by reason of its nearness and insularity, as perhaps to escape the vengeance of the victorious in their tribal wars . . .

As far as can be stated with certainty, the number of Indian tribes on the Island at the time of the discovery was at least seven, namely: the Aruacas, Chaïmas, Tamanaques, Chaguanes, Salives, Quaquas and Caraïbes; this latter tribe was further divided into four sub-tribes: the Nepoïos, Yaïos, Carinepagotos, and Cumanagotos, the whole thus forming eleven separate bodies . . .

To these five, if we add the Chaïmas, of which some still remain in the country; the Tamanaques, who must have inhabited the centre of the Island since there is a mountain there of that name; the Quaquas, who according to Humbolt crossed

over to the continent with their neighbours the Salives; the Chaguanes, whose name a quarter of the western coast bears; the Pariagotos, a few of whom still exist; and the Cumanagotos who lived on the eastern coast, since we find there a bay of that name, we arrived at a total of eleven

Over time, several other names for these peoples have been offered. And it is easy to imagine Trinidad — the most southerly island of the Caribbean, once part of the South American mainland — as a bustling and important hub. People from the mainland had only to travel down the Orinoco River and through simple navigation they could make their way to the island, where they could settle or gather provisions for further voyages.

The original inhabitants of the island kept to their regular practices, oblivious to Columbus's claims, and no attempts were made to settle Trinidad until 1531. This attempt failed. There was another failed attempt in 1569. The Spanish managed to secure their first permanent settlement in Trinidad in 1592: the old capital of St Joseph. Capuchin monks then established several missions on the island.

The 1493 papal bull *Inter Caetera*, handed down by Pope Alexander VI, had granted unlimited rights to Spain and Portugal in the "New World". *Inter Caetera* sanctioned Christian dominion and called for the subjugation of non-Christian peoples and their lands. The colonial Spanish claimed the document gave them the right to wage just war to convert local populations who refused to immediately accept Christianity.

The Catholic Church saw the expression of aboriginal culture as the work of the devil. Churches and cathedrals were built on the sites of old native worshipping grounds. Native deities were replaced by Christian saints. Rituals and dances associated with previously existing gods were reapplied to Christian saints. Cemeteries came under Catholic control, as did all official registers of births, marriages, and deaths. The Church's missions provided services to the local communities, such as schools, hospitals, insane asylums, and aid to the poor. But only converted Indians



*Members of the Santa Rosa Carib Community from the 1880s to the present day*

were allowed inside the missions. Bishops and priests felt that segregation was the only way to ensure the converted Indians would not be tempted by the pagan practices of the uninitiated.

Even though by the 1780s Trinidad was still largely “an Amerindian society”, the Capuchin missions became the centrepiece of a commercial and military strategy to “reduce” the aboriginals. Amerindians of the Missions of San Agustín de Arauca (Arouca), San Pablo de Tacarigua (Tacarigua), and the Partido de Quare (Caura) were amalgamated at the Mission of Arima after the 1783 *Cedula de Población*, by which governor José Maria Chacon granted land in the valleys of the Northern and Central Ranges to incoming settlers — mainly French, and all Catholic. The Amerindians who stayed behind found work on the new cocoa estates.

In the late 19th century, migrant workers from Venezuela who came to work on these estates lived with the descendants of Amerindian, Spanish, and African

ancestors in small, isolated valley communities. As the cocoa industry gradually declined, estates in these lush valleys folded, and workers used the old trails that wound through the hills to move around to those few estates that remained, following work where they could get it.

Amerindian families in the cocoa-growing region of Arima lived in poverty. They had no real income, and when they did work they were sometimes paid part of their wages in alcohol. They were sold alcohol by a store in the Mission itself — its owners also operated one of the few dry goods stores in the area at the time — and many adults were unable to read or write. Unable to deal with the changes that came with “development”, many left their lands in Arima, settling in small pockets in the Northern Range in areas like Brasso Seco and La Laja, making their living through small gardening projects on lands their ancestors once possibly occupied.

Growing up as a member of the Santa Rosa Carib Community in Arima, I was taught that we were the descendants of an Amerindian tribe; that corn and cassava had provided sustenance for generations; that keeping the family together and looking out for each other was of paramount importance; that marriage to someone from within the community was best; that it was right to go to church and worship the Lord Jesus Christ every Sunday morning, and be a good Catholic; that God was in all things; that faith would bring reward; that it was our duty to take part in the Santa Rosa Festival; that doctors had much to learn from plants; that nature could provide the answers; that there is much we do not know, but there is much to learn from the lives of plants and animals, the flight of birds and changes in the weather. These were the keys given to me by my guardians — the whole community was involved in my upbringing.

My grandmother would wake all her grandchildren at the stroke of six o'clock every Sunday morning so we could dress and attend church with her. But she placed just as much importance in "bush baths", dream interpretation, and teaching us that loving nature and our surroundings was key to "salvation".

Going to the all-girl Catholic school that women in my family have attended for as long as anyone can remember ensured steady Christian indoctrination. By the time I left Catholic school and started going to the Arima Government Secondary School, I had many questions about my heritage. In particular, I struggled with history books that taught that Amerindian people in the Caribbean had been wiped out.

I was confused by the fact that in a cosmopolitan society like Trinidad's the issue of being "pure-blooded" was still so important for Amerindian descendants, operating almost like a caste system within the community, and weighing heavily in the perceptions of outsiders as to what made a "Carib" — because "the only pure Caribs were dead Caribs". In *Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs*, Canadian anthropologist Maximilian Forte brings all these issues together for the first time, and in so doing sheds light on the "mystery" of the Santa Rosa Caribs as no author has done before.

It is true that the Santa Rosa Carib Community is very visible in Trinidad and Tobago, but by and large, the members of the community are viewed as "a small, quaint group of Catholic faithful made up of really old people, who believe they are descendants of Caribs" — but, then, there are no "real" Caribs. Faced with this "denial" in their own country, over the years

Amerindian descendants have sometimes chosen to avoid or not speak of their ancestry. So the Amerindians have disappeared — or, at least, in the tradition of their warrior ancestors, they have gone underground, adapted to the changes unfolding around them, learned what it takes to survive.

Forte refers to the work of several other anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists in his study, but brings the facts together to give the reader a real sense of the survival story of Amerindians in Trinidad. It is not that he is the first to study Trinidad's Amerindian history — in most history books of worth, the first chapters are dedicated to the island's first inhabitants. But I have come across only a few published books dedicated to the subject. It seems that, while there is no shortage of interest in the topic, few are inclined to untangle the web that shrouds most of this story. Why are we still reading only about European perceptions of Caribs and Arawaks in our history classes? Why has the question of whether we are, in fact, "Caribs" or not, ever been properly explored?

For the first time in a major published work, Forte also explores the contentious issue of how the Amerindians of Arima lost their lands. Forte's research suggests that the mission lands in Arima, which were once occupied by descendants of the island's first inhabitants, were never meant to be sold or traded. When the colony of Trinidad passed from Spanish to British possession in 1797, the articles of capitulation signed by Governor José Maria Chacon and General Sir Ralph Abercromby specified that Spanish laws would remain in effect for the time being. This was formalised in the 1802 Treaty of Amiens, by which Spain ceded Trinidad to Britain on certain conditions — one of which was that the Catholic missions for the Amerindians would be safeguarded. The first British civilian governor, Ralph Woodford (1813–28), was careful to uphold the provisions of the treaty. But by the 1830s new "English" laws began to replace the old Spanish code, and the administrative authority of the Capuchin missions was eroded: "effectively terminated, as some argue, in the 1840s — although in the case of Arima, at least, there is no evidence to suggest that such termination was ever *de jure*," Forte explains.

But with state- and church-sanctioned freedom to settle where they wished, "outsiders" flowed into the small town of Arima, establishing houses and farms on land that had been occupied by Amerindians for centuries. As Forte makes clear, this went hand in hand with the promulgation of the story that Trini-

dad's "true" Amerindians had "died out":

The "deserted island" thesis thus in fact seems to have been articulated for the first time in order to justify the dismissal of aboriginal and pre-British land tenure. Worse yet, the uncritical acceptance of statements plucked from their original contexts, time periods, and intended audiences can help to legitimise what was in fact a calculated argument for the colonial usurpation of aboriginal lands and the dispossession of aboriginal heirs.

Forte also explores the idea that "cannibalism" was inserted into the historical record when it suited the colonial authorities and settlers. As time went on, all Trinidad's Amerindians would be thought of as "Caribs", and all Caribs classified as cannibals. And these narratives have endured. Forte quotes Gaylord Kelshall, former head of the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard and director of the Chaguaramas Military History Museum, speaking at the museum's opening ceremony in 1998:

"The Amerindians were left behind by time . . . It was a clash of cultures . . . It was not brutal conquistadores destroying a way of life. The Amerindians had to die." He suggested that members of the . . . audience . . . would have lent a hand in killing the Amerindian too had they walked into a temple and met one of them, his teeth filed, hair greased with human blood, and knew his job was to rip human hearts out of the chests of living sacrificial victims. "You too would have killed him."

Governor Lord Harris (1846–54) reorganised administrative divisions in Trinidad, creating ward boundaries in 1849 and embarking on the collection of ward rates for public works development. Those who could not pay the new ward rates or did not understand the law had their lands confiscated and sold. Formal title to lands had to be demonstrated, or land deeds registered, which worked against Arima's Amerindians, who either possessed no such written deeds, were not informed about the new policies, or, in most cases, could not read. Forte quotes historian Anthony de Verteuil:

In 1849, after the passing of a new territorial ordinance, "the lots in the village were put up for sale at an upset price — a measure of which is highly questionable, as far as the Indians were

concerned, since the lands lost in the mission had been granted to them as a compensation for property of which they had been deprived". Thus the Amerindians became the only group in Trinidad whose freedom from bondage was rewarded with the expropriation of their lands. All this happened comparatively recently, not in 1492.

Forte first raised this question of the Amerindians being "cheated" out of their lands in 2002, in a report he presented to the president of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, Ricardo Barath — who is also deputy mayor of the People's National Movement (PNM)-controlled borough of Arima. The Santa Rosa community took no action, and Forte's findings were never publicised. No steps were taken even to pass the information to community members, or investigate what land rights, if any, might be arguable under law.

**M**aximilian Forte studied at the Institute of International Relations at the St Augustine, Trinidad, campus of the University of the West Indies from 1990 to 1993, after graduating from Canada's York University with a degree in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. He returned to Trinidad in 1995 to live among the Santa Rosa Carib Community in Arima and begin the fieldwork that would lead to his anthropology MA and PhD, and over the last decade he has made several — sometimes extended — return visits. He is now an assistant professor at Concordia University in Montreal. *Ruins of Absence* draws on his PhD dissertation, "Re-Engineering Indigeneity: Cultural Brokerage, the Political Economy of Tradition and the Santa Rosa Carib Community of Arima, Trinidad and Tobago".

*Ruins of Absence* explores the political and social dynamics of the small group of Amerindian descendants living in Arima under the umbrella of the Carib Santa Rosa Community, and the community's struggle to define and maintain its "tradition". He explores the relationship between three community leaders: the Carib Queen (currently Valentina Medina, my great-aunt), the Santa Rosa Carib Community president, Ricardo Barath (Hernandez), and the medicine man Cristo Adonis. Relations between these three are cordial, Forte says, but it is clear that divisions exist.

I was . . . attracted to this medley of representational facets, from the matriarchal

*continued on page 27*

## S'maatin poems

continued from page 17

like the short-short "mariposa":

the mornings are fewer  
the nights longer  
love is fine and full  
here the fight rewards the future  
and everybody else but you  
makes bad coffee.

Perhaps, too, being away from his island's 37 square miles and Great Salt Pond (which give these two collections their titles) made the poet think not only of home but of other occupied lands: there are two Iraq poems in the second collection.

While the US occupation of Iraq is freshly squeezed from the headlines, it's easy for most of us to forget that in the Caribbean there are still several territories — Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, and Sekou's birthplace of Aruba, for example — where arguments for independence butt up against exaltation of the benefits of being a department of a colonising nation. The mid-20th-century struggles for independence that swept the region have yielded dubious victories. Is sovereignty all it's cracked up to be when corruption, inefficiency, and shockingly fragile economies seem to be the fruit of that labour? Sekou thinks so; in these collections he has named an independent Sint Maarten's generations of leaders to come, plotted its expansion ("we go breed the sea", he writes in one poem), given it a national holiday. He calls his home "S'maatin", which sounds like a hurt, a bruise, an open wound. S'maatin need to heal, he preaches.

And while it's mostly impossible to separate the poet from his politics in either collection, it is possible to enjoy both (but moreso *The Salt Reapers*) just for the magisterial register of Sekou's writing. He brings a deft wit, biblical cadence, and West Indian wisdom to his poems, which, though good to read on the page, rise to another plane when heard. It's aural poetry. Which makes sense, considering that Sekou (the pen-name of Joseph H. Lake, a historian and cultural specialist) has published eleven books of poetry, monologues, and short stories, including these, but is still best known as a performance poet. Sekou's *Nativity* and *Dramatic Monologues for Today*, *Lovesongs Make You Cry*, and *Brotherhood of the Spurs* have been required reading at some universities; it's possible that *The Salt Reaper*, with its passion, elegance, and power, may be heading for the list. ■

## With a Carib eye

continued from page 21

authority of the Queen, to the modern corporate president, to an almost New Age spiritual-revivalist indigeneity: a politician, a singer and ecotour guide, and a grandmother — all acting in the name of tradition yet rarely in agreement on what that tradition is.

These differences have only added to the "identity crisis" facing Amerindian descendants. Forte uncovers a community of relics, still torn between Church and State, grounded by the beliefs of their ancestors. But he does not investigate how young people growing up in this state of confusion have fared.

Forte's writing style leans towards the academic, but amateur history enthusiasts need not feel daunted; it is quite an easy read (but for a few sections where Forte uses graphs to illustrate his points, and the explanation of the key seems to require an altogether separate study). And the information contained between this book's covers is priceless to generations who have grown up in the Santa Rosa community confused about their identity and history.

Until now, what we have had to depend on, as Amerindian descendants, are the stories of our grandparents and our great-grandparents. We have trusted their tales for years, though our school textbooks made us doubt them. Now Forte has provided some validation: a meeting of fact and belief. *Absence of Ruins* sheds more light on this country's Amerindian history than any other work I have come across. And the story is not important only to *my* story — there are many more Trinidadians who are descendants of Amerindian peoples than the members of the Santa Rosa Carib Community.

And it is clear that Trinidad has much to learn about and from its past.

As I completed this review, Forte's second book, a volume of papers by various contributors that he has edited under the title *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival*, was "in press". Perhaps it may do for the wider Caribbean what *Absence of Ruins* has done for Trinidad. ■