

BOOK REVIEWS

Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs: (Post)Colonial Representations of Aboriginality in Trinidad and Tobago. MAXIMILIAN C. FORTE. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xiv + 283 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.95)

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This is fascinating, well-researched, and properly historicized ethnography. Forte undertakes the complex and subtle task of elucidating the dynamics of an idea, “Carib,” and the ways it is invoked, debated, contested, and expressed in the context of the modern community of Arima, Trinidad. As any Caribbean scholar knows, the notion of “Carib” is central, not only to past history or, indeed, regional etymologies of place, but also for the way in which it evokes the whole story of colonial encounter, conquest, and postcoloniality throughout the region. Truly this is a concept that comes not merely freighted with meaning but with a whole baggage-train in tow. Against this background Forte admirably responds to the need to present more than functionalist-style description of contemporary performances of identity, and the politics that surround it, by offering a thoughtful account of the historical antecedents of contemporary meanings and the ways in which colonial and nationalist politics have created this context.

The nature of indigenous persistence in Trinidad is demographically and historically problematic, as is the case for all “indigenous” groups throughout the Antilles. This is because the absence of certain standard markers of indigeneity stand in apparent contradiction to the insistent presence of claims to Caribness and an inheritance of certain kinds of cultural traditions. As a result, the disappearance of indigenous populations has been repeatedly declared, from the sixteenth century through to the present day, yet the insis-

tence of local voices on their inherent and indomitable indigeneity continues to challenge the much better publicized declarations of politicians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians alike.

In the original schematic of colonial ethnology, the cannibalistic and rebellious Carib stood in counterpoint to that other chimera of ethnological categorization, the Arawak, who appear as tractable, pliant, and also conveniently absent. For these reasons any invocation of the notion of the Carib is already a complex statement of identity, historical rootedness, and a particular kind of political and social orientation. The truth or credibility of such an invocation cannot be reduced to a positivistic catalogue of historical or archaeological facts, but must be interpreted in light of the long and vicious history of colonial and neocolonial politics in the Caribbean. In such an intellectual context a study such as Forte's should not be understood as offering a definitive analysis of these issues, but rather as a situated account of how such issues continue to play out in the context of contemporary Trinidad.

Forte thus carefully maps the origins and rhetorics of the idea of "Carib" and shows how this is politically and culturally deployed by the people of Arima and its environs. The strength of this analytical strategy is enhanced by a keen sense of historical change, particularly as Forte follows it from nineteenth-century colonial antiquarianism through to the globalized and networked presence of Carib identity today. Perhaps what is most striking in this historical presentation is the way in which the forms of media and categories of investigation and verification may change but the content of the idea of "Carib" itself has remained relatively limited in scope and necessarily paired with its counterpoint, the Arawak (or, latterly, "Taino").

Forte begins with an account of the colonial era in Trinidad, noting the various forces at work in producing Carib identity, and then moves to consider the way in which that identity became spatially and intellectually emplaced within Trinidad, particularly at the Arima mission which has subsequently become known as "the home of the Caribs." This is followed by an extended analysis of how the "Carib" have been written in the various textual sources in tandem with the way in which the idea of indigeneity itself has also emerged. This sets the scene for a close examination of the politics of indigeneity and "Caribness" in Trinidad and especially of ways in which the Trinidadian nationhood in part anchors itself in these twin ideas, despite the marginal place that communities such as Arima hold within the modern state of Trinidad. Crucial to this process, as analyzed by Forte, is the role of the "cultural broker," preeminently the Santa Rosa Carib Community organization, which has both spearheaded efforts of cultural revival and acted as a clearinghouse for those seeking to "visit" and "know more about" the Caribs in Trinidad. This presentation is complemented by a more conventional ethnographic account of contemporary Carib festivals and their projection onto the national stage of Trinidad, as well as an examination of the ways in which

global connections with other indigenous revivalist movements and the use of internet websites have allowed an even wider projection of the idea of “Carib” survival in Trinidad.

Despite the interest of these materials it would have been relevant to include some clearer assessment of other “Carib” cultural movements, such as those in Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Belize, Dominica, and Venezuela, especially given the large populations that such movements represent. Likewise, the invocation of the category “indigeneity” certainly should have included reference to Alcida Ramos’s book on this notion as it has been deployed in Brazil. Nonetheless this is an excellent volume that clearly shows the limits of an overly exoticized anthropology interested only in supposedly pristine natives or isolated forest dwellers and which brings to the fore the modernity of tradition in the Caribbean.