

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. xv+284 pp. (Cloth US\$59.95)

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Anthropologists and other social scientists have largely marginalized the notion of indigeneity in the Post-Conquest Caribbean, arguing that Amerindian populations in the region were virtually wiped out during the century following European contact. Instead, scholarly analyses of traditions maintained and identities contested among Caribbean populations have centered on the presence of descendants of Africans (and in certain cases, Indians from the subcontinent or Asians). Maximilian Forte challenges, or at least complicates, the scope of such analyses for Trinidad and Tobago, where an additional group and category exists—the Caribs, who identify themselves as the island’s indigenous people.

Forte’s study of the indigenous “presence” in Trinidad seeks to understand the means whereby and conditions through which “Carib” persists as a valued identification despite the decimation of Amerindian populations and fragmentary incorporation of Amerindian cultural expressions throughout the Caribbean during the colonial period. He navigates this paradox by promoting a consideration of indigeneity in wider social and political-economic terms as well as at the level of individuals and their traditions. The ethnography focuses on the Santa Rita Carib Community (SRCC) in Arima, whose leaders are the principal “brokers” of Carib culture in Trinidad and abroad. Forte contends that, in addition to the SRCC, numerous other civic and private agents are also engaged in constructions of Trinidadian indigeneity. In order to explain these processes, he develops the concept of “re-engineering indigeneity,” whereby a revival or resurgence is brought about by vested actors influenced and informed not only by “tradition,” but also by political-economic forces. As Forte notes, “There is

something in between total absence and seamless continuity.”

The book’s chapters move from the past to the present. In the early sections, Forte draws upon histories of the colonial period to illustrate how Europeans labeled Caribbean Amerindians as part of broader struggles for control and legitimacy. As the Carib population and its geopolitical influence in Trinidad and Tobago declined, Caribs became linked to Christian mission settlements both spatially and symbolically. No longer a threat, the Caribs came to be commemorated in the fashion of “noble savages” at the Arima Catholic Mission. More recently, the Carib settlement in Arima has come to represent for Trinidadians a link to their precolonial past, while representations of indigeneity increasingly figure in nationalist ideologies and rhetoric.

Forte then turns his attention to the historical, localized as well as global “meta-indigenous” tropes that the SRCC draws upon to define Carib identity and traditions. Participation in longstanding events such as the Santa Rosa Festival provides the SRCC with the space to perform and affirm the values of their community, while demonstrating the community’s continuity and survival. Yet Carib brokers also emphasize their “cultural translation” and adaptation processes as fundamental components of Carib group resilience. Forte analyzes how the re-engineering of Carib indigeneity has been expanded and globalized. Several of his examples show that some members of the SRCC who have no Carib blood ties nonetheless “feel indigenous.” He also discusses the SRCC’s adoption of eclectic practices from North American and other indigenous Amerindian groups. The most thorny and, ultimately, valuable question that Forte asks his informants and himself is “Who is a Carib?” He treats the relevant conceptual, ideological, and practical problems with finesse, and his response makes an important contribution to the theories of indigeneity.

Forte’s careful interrogation of the notions of authenticity and representation among the Caribs of Trinidad occupies a central place throughout the book. In the final chapters, however, he directly confronts one of indigeneity’s key paradoxes: it is “seemingly free floating while emphasizing local

rootedness” (p. 200). The Pan-Indigenous Movement of the early 1990s, and subsequent victories by native groups worldwide with regard to securing land and human or civil rights, has forced researchers to consider the implications of new exchanges among indigenous groups, as well as negotiations between native peoples and the state. Forte’s ethnography illustrates how the SRCC has engaged with international indigenous groups, while appropriating the Creole cultural tropes of Trinidad and Tobago in their effort to gain legitimacy as that nation-state’s “First People.” Forte is careful to stress that a multiplicity of interests and actors are at

work in the re-engineering of Carib indigeneity both within and outside the SRCC. Although this emphasis generally serves the study’s objectives, Forte outlines several important tensions only to leave them underdeveloped. We would benefit, for instance, from a more detailed analysis of dynamic relations in the SRCC between two types of agents: those whose representations of indigeneity center on cultural “maintenance” and those who focus on cultural “revival.” Overall, however, Forte’s work succeeds in elaborating on the discussion of indigeneity by adding nuance to a concept that continues to be plagued by essentialism.