

Documenting the Myth of Taíno Extinction¹

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I am an historian and anthropologist. My interests are the Dominican people and their culture. For my doctoral dissertation, I studied how this fascinating culture began to develop. In the process of researching my dissertation, I discovered many little studied documents. I am going to share some of them with you today. I am going to show you how, using historical and anthropological methods, I ask questions of documents, of the people who left us those documents, and of the particular situations under which they wrote the documents—in this way I discovered the origins of many of Hispaniola's myths. We are going to start with something very familiar.

For the past 510 years, because of the “discovery” of Hispaniola and its colonization by Spaniards, residents of today's Dominican Republic have maintained an image of themselves as “Spaniards.” Spanish heroes have been glorified in all aspects of Dominican history that are taught from pre-Kindergarten through the university level, and Spanish cultural elements have been glorified in Dominican architecture, paintings, and literature. The recognized Native Indian

¹ Details and references to most topics covered in this paper are available in the author's dissertation, *Cultural Genesis: Relationships among Indians, Africans, and Spaniards in rural Hispaniola, first half of the sixteenth century*. Vanderbilt University, 1998. Available from UMI Microform (number 9915091), Ann Arbor, Michigan. Complete bibliographic information is available on UMI's Dissertation Abstracts database at www.umi.com.

elements in modern Dominican identity, history, and culture are relegated to a few items of food and “common” things used by *campesinos*, to a few dozen Taíno words and phrases, and to a plethora of Taíno place names. There is also a confusing range of supposedly Indian skin colors, such as “indio claro” and “indio oscuro,” that have little, if anything, to do with bloodlines. The color categories have been in common use since the Trujillo Era, when the concept was re-initiated as part of the dictator’s program to “Dominicanize” the country—to distinguish Dominicans from Haitians.

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



This is a Taíno cave guardian sculpture in today’s Los Haitises National Park. Images like these, frozen in stone, frozen in time, are the most vivid Taíno images in the minds of most people today.

Yet the Taínos whom Christopher Columbus discovered in the Bahamas, on Cuba, and on Hispaniola during his first voyage were eager to exchange foods, drinking

water, parrots, and gilded jewelry for the beads, little mirrors, and red hats that Columbus had brought as trade goods. They also exchanged something else—their genes.

I jokingly ask my students, noting first that they do not need advanced math nor psychic powers to figure it out: “When were the first mestizos born?” The answer, easy to compute, is--nine months after Columbus’s ships landed in the Caribbean.

Can you imagine any sailors of any nation or era, after a month at sea, *not* taking advantage of a welcoming party that includes “naked” women with, apparently, none of the sexual prohibitions that were so integral a part of the lives of Catholic Spaniards at the end of the Middle Ages? Those were two of the first myths that arose about the Taínos, that they went naked and that they had no sexual prohibitions.



--Illustration, *Histoire Naturelle des Indes: The Drake Manuscript* in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Columbus and all the other chroniclers of the era wrote that the Indians went naked. They often added that the Indians did not cover their “shameful parts.”

Think about the term “naked.” It’s a Eurocentric term that means not to be “dressed,” not to be covered with cloth. After describing the Taínos’ nakedness, the Spanish chroniclers went on to describe the Taínos’ elaborate arm and leg bands, tattoos and painted adornments, headdresses, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, the caciques’ (chiefs’) elaborate belts, masks, and feathered capes, and the *naguas*--finely woven cotton “skirts”—that some of the Taíno women wore. That’s a lot of clothing and accoutrements for a supposedly naked people! The women’s *naguas*, by the way, were more loincloths than skirts, for they did not hide the women’s buttocks and were not meant to hide their pubic areas, either. Like today’s Western women wear wedding bands, the *naguas* indicated that the women who wore them were married, and the nobler a woman was, the longer was the *nagua* that she wore.

Like the concept of nakedness, the chroniclers’ reports that the Taínos did not cover their shameful parts was ethnocentric and specific to European society, for “parts” such as breasts, buttocks, and pubic regions are not universally shameful. What was shameful to the Taínos? The chroniclers didn’t say because they didn’t know, but modern-day anthropologists have noted that women from distantly related indigenous tribes of the Amazon and Orinoco river valleys find it shameful to be seen in public without their arm and leg bands, and the men, who pull their foreskins forward and tie the sheaths closed with twine, would be dreadfully ashamed if the twine were to slip off in public.

The belief that the Taínos had no sexual prohibitions cost at least 39 Spaniards their lives. Columbus had to leave 39 men behind on the island of

Hispaniola when his flagship, the *Santa María*, sank on a reef on Christmas Eve in 1492. When he returned a year later, with seventeen ships loaded with Spaniards eager for the gold they believed abounded in “The Indies,” they found the rotting corpses of their massacred countrymen. Columbus’s ally, the Cacique Guacanagarí, explained as best he could—excluding himself from any blame: All of the Spaniards who had stayed behind, he said, were given female companions. This was standard procedure among the Taínos and other Indian peoples, who appear to have known that it improved the gene pool. In particular, visiting dignitaries were given female companions, which demonstrates that the Taínos held the Spanish newcomers in high esteem—at first.

The Spaniards, of course, were not familiar with the norms of Taíno society. They appear to have assumed, because they were given a number of women to enjoy sexually, that there were no sexual prohibitions at all among their hosts. The Spaniards did not know that the women wearing *naguas* were married, nor that married women were strictly off limits to anyone except their husbands. Furthermore, the Spaniards appear to have made the assumption that the Taínos did not value gold, for they traded it for “valueless” objects—valueless to the Spaniards, that is, but exotic, therefore very valuable, to the Taíno.²

The Spaniards also did not know that the most unforgivable offense among the Taínos was theft. Not content with trading, the Spaniards began taking whatever gold objects they encountered. Doubtlessly, the Spaniards

² See Mary Helms, *Ulysses’ Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

unknowingly committed many other social blunders during their stay among the



Taínos. Exasperated by the uncivilized behavior of the Spaniards, a group of Taínos led by the paramount cacique Caonabó fixed the problem by getting rid of the pests.

This statue of Caonabó in chains guards the entrance to the third-floor exhibits at the Museum of Dominican Man in Santo Domingo.

Columbus condemned Caonabó for his actions against the 39 Spaniards. The cacique died aboard ship, bound for a royal trial in Spain. Little did he or the other Taínos know that, like the rats that came to the Americas on the Spanish ships, there would soon be thousands of Spaniards in the region, and Spanish laws and morés would soon displace those of the Taíno, at least in the public sphere.

My colleague, the American archaeologist Kathleen Deagan, developed a theory about public and domestic spheres which all of my work has proven to be true. Everything in the public sphere—the chain of public leadership and administration, concepts of land ownership and land use, law and justice, official religious beliefs and practices, monetary values—all of those areas that had been in the male Taíno sphere before the arrival of the Spaniards, were replaced by Spanish structures and were overseen by Spanish males after 1492. But the

domestic sphere, the female sphere, remained overwhelmingly Taíno—or rather *Taína*, the feminine version of the word.

I don't have time to go into the highly controversial and virtually unprovable demographics of the conquest era, but suffice it to say that, compared to the number of Taínos on the island (in the millions), very few Spaniards came, and those who did were overwhelmingly male.³ Most of them took Taína sexual partners. Without doubt, many Taínas were unwilling sexual partners, but many others married Spaniards and formed inter-ethnic families.

Not only was marriage to Taínas allowed by the Spanish Crown, it was encouraged. The Spaniards' wives were baptized and took Spanish names; they adopted Spanish dress styles; attended Spanish churches; lived in Spanish-style houses; and to all outward appearances became Spanish. But that was the outward, public appearance. Inside their homes, in the domestic sphere, the Taínas' lives and those of their children remained very Taíno. What they ate, how it was stored and prepared, child-raising practices, home medicinal and religious practices, storytelling, the importance of song, music, dance, and naming patterns—even the concept of who is family—all have remained overwhelmingly Taíno in the Dominican Republic through the present day. Let me add that the Spaniards' custom of privacy within the home lends support to Deagan's thesis of Taíno continuance in the domestic sphere.

In Santo Domingo, which was the Spaniards' capital and administrative center, Spaniards reproduced their homeland's infrastructures and cultural

³For an excellent review of the “original population” debate, see Noble David Cook, “Disease and the Depopulation of Hispaniola, 1492-1518,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 2(1-1), 1993: 213-245.

patterns as closely as they could. Nonetheless, Santo Domingo was a frontier city. Even in the public sphere, the culture that evolved there was not a perfect European replica because of the island's unique geography and climate; the distance of the colony from the Iberian motherland; and the integration of Taíno and African beliefs and cultural traditions. The Spanish colonists were even less successful at replicating their European infrastructures and culture in the rural villages than they were in the capital.

Throughout the island's rural towns and villages, in the gold mining regions, and, later, on the sugar plantations, Spaniards were outnumbered by an average of six-and-a-half or eight-and-a-half to one by Indians, Africans, and mixed-blood "others" long after the Indians were supposed to have disappeared and long before most of the African slaves arrived. ("Others" is the word used in the island's early censuses—terms like "mestizo" and "mulatto" did not appear on census records until the 1580s.⁴)

In fact, the Spaniards' domination of the island of Hispaniola was illusory, another myth. Between 1492 and 1510 they had founded only two cities, fewer than twenty small villages, and a dozen fortresses in key locations—but that left a lot of the island's territory uncontrolled, territory where there were no Spaniards at all, but for the occasional patrols. In the first decade of the 16th century, Spaniards began to leave the island in massive numbers seeking gold, pearls,

⁴The first census in the region with a category for "mestizos" was in Cuba in 1582—90 years after the Europeans' arrival. Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 44-45.

and more Indian workers on Puerto Rico, Cuba, the islands of the Lesser Antilles, and in today's Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru.

The Spaniards who remained on Hispaniola began to pull back to regions closer to the capital, which was better patrolled than the villages, had more European conveniences, and from which all shipping and commerce was conducted—all the things that meant civilized life to the Spaniards. As the Spaniards pulled back toward Santo Domingo, Spain's enemies—the French, the Dutch, the English—began to raid the less protected peripheries of the island. And in those peripheral parts of the island lived the maroons, about whom I'm going to speak in a moment.

The year 1510 is significant because that's the year that Fray Antonio Montesinos was chosen by the Dominican Order of friars on the island to speak out against the encomienda system. They believed it was an abusive system that was killing off the Taínos. They wanted to eliminate the encomienda system and relocate the Taínos into missionary villages, believing that it would improve conversion efforts and halt the death toll. Bartolomé de las Casas was an encomendero until Montesino's sermons. He, too, believed that the Taínos' massive die-off was due to abuses by some encomenderos. He spent the balance of his life defending the Indians and finally succeeded in getting the Royal Crown to outlaw the encomienda system throughout the Americas in 1547. That did not save the Indians, however, for neither they nor the Spaniards of the era knew about all the microscopic germs and viruses that accompanied the Spaniards, their animals, and their slaves to the New World, a world without the

immunities that all peoples of the Old World had developed throughout thousands of years of intercontinental trade.

Almost all of the standard histories claim that the last Taínos of Hispaniola were those who rebelled with Cacique Enriquillo from 1519-1534. In the first-ever treaty made between an Amerindian chief and a European king, Enriquillo and his people received their own village, Boyá, near Azua—a village that was attacked several years later by rebellious African slaves who burned down the village, killing off any inhabitants who did not flee.



Statue of Enriquillo in Independencia Province, Dominican Republic.

The concept of Enriquillo's people as the last of the Taínos is very romantic and elevates Enriquillo to superhero status.

Perhaps this is why Dominicans today take an ironic pride in the supposed fact that it is only on their island that no Native Indians

survived the Conquest Era. But the romantic concept is quite contrary to the factual evidence. Today we know that most of the Taínos were not killed by abuses endured under the encomienda system, nor by the sporadic wars of the 1490s, nor by the systematic massacres ordered by Nicolás de Ovando from 1502-1505 that were meant to “pacify” the Indians. No. All of these contributed to the decline of the native population, but most of the Taínos died of illnesses like measles and influenza because they had no immunities to them, and after 1519, of smallpox. In tropical areas like Hispaniola, between 80 and 90% of the

Native Indians died of plagues that often preceded the actual arrival of the Spaniards, for the germs and viruses were carried by messengers bearing news from plague-ridden areas. An 80-90% loss is a significant and horrifying loss. It is so horrifying that it obscures the fact that 10 to 20% of the Taínos survived.



Leidy Medina (left in photo) has Taíno inheritance on both sides. Her father Eugenio's family is from the mountains of Bonaó and her mother's family is from Las Matas de Farfán, in the mountains near San Juan de la Maguana. (Altagracia, her mother, is in the center of the photo, and her grandmother Leila, who died in 2013, is on the right).

A re-examination of the documents of the era reveals the origins of the myth of Taíno extinction:

- When the chroniclers wrote that all of the Indians of Hispaniola were gone, they were, in fact, following the lead of Bartolomé de Las Casas, who exaggerated the Taíno population decline in order to convince the emperor to abolish the encomienda system and, instead, establish missionary villages for the Indians' conversion.
- The chroniclers also wrote about the Taíno in comparison to the denser populations of Native Indians later discovered on the Mainland; this is especially true about Oviedo, who spent his early years in today's Panama.
- The chroniclers were also repeating what was written in letter after letter to the Royal Court by encomenderos on Hispaniola who exaggerated their losses in order to gain sympathy and royal permission to import more African slaves,

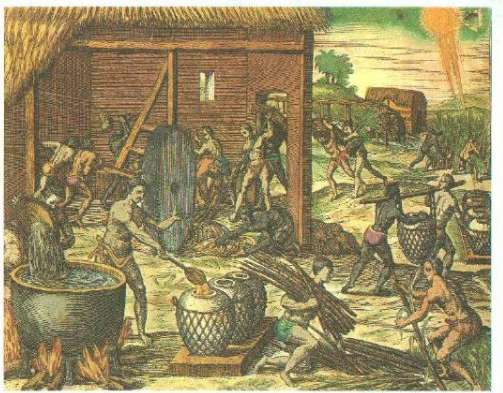
whom they believed were “stronger” than the Taínos because they did not fall prey to the diseases that decimated the Indians.

Historians and demographers generally use the censuses of the era, such as the census that accompanied the 1514 Repartimiento, to confirm what the chroniclers wrote about the drastic decline of the Taíno population. They forget that Taínos fled from the Spaniards many years before the famous episode concerning Enriquillo and his people. Many *cimarrones* (“maroons” in English) hid from the Spaniards in the mountains of Bahoruco and in other peripheral regions of the island. Governor Nicolás de Ovando himself wrote in 1502 that the Tainos and Africans frequently ran away together, using the Indians’ knowledge of the countryside to evade the Spaniards.

How can you pretend to count people for a census who are hiding from you? The Spanish censuses, like that of 1514, are inherently misleading. They only account for those Taínos who stayed on the Spaniards’ *encomiendas*.

There is another problem with the censuses of the era. They are misinterpreted because people were categorized in a very different manner in the sixteenth century than they are today. Hispaniola’s residents were generally recognized as Spaniards, Indians, or African slaves, but a lot of “others” appeared on the censuses as well. Furthermore, the categories of Spaniard or Indian appear to have depended upon social factors and the personal judgment of the census takers, not on biological factors. If a Spaniard and a Taína had a child who was raised in the city or a European-style town, spoke Castilian, was baptized Catholic, wore European clothes, received a European education, and

“acted” Spanish—then he or she was listed as Spanish on the censuses. If that same child lived in a *yucayeque* (Taíno village), spoke Taíno, practiced Taíno religious rituals, dressed as a Taíno, and acted Taíno, then he or she was listed on the censuses as Indian. That’s confusing for modern scholars, but it was also confusing for the colonial-era census takers, who had to try to figure out how to categorize people when there were, as yet, no fixed standards.⁵



Sugar-mill workers included Indians, Africans, Canarians, and many mixed-blood peoples.

--Illustration by DeBry.

There are three extant censuses from the first half of the sixteenth century that give us an idea of the variety of people who lived and worked on Hispaniola’s sugar plantations. The first of the three censuses resulted from a lawsuit initiated July 19, 1533, between the civil and ecclesiastical councils in Santo Domingo. The demographics were gathered from a headcount taken in 1530 on nineteen of Hispaniola's plantations, plus a scattering of small sugar estates.⁶ The census enumerated 1,870 African workers, most of whom were probably slaves, and 427 “Spaniards,” most of whom were no doubt what you

⁵An excellent exploration of how differently “ethnicity” was conceptualized in the sixteenth century than it is today is David Eltis, “Ethnicity in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” Chapter 9 of *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 224-306.

⁶*Información* from AGI, Justicia 12, N1, R2, as cited in Mira Caballos, *El indio Antillano*, 155.

and I would call mestizos. Although the legal papers pertaining to the case say there were "some" Indians working on the plantations, the only actual numbers that were provided came from five plantations on the Río Nigua that, combined, had 200 Indians. Such a round number is suspect; it was probably an approximation. No numbers are provided for the category of Indians on the other fourteen plantations, just question marks and a total of 700 unspecified "others." Clearly, no one wanted to release the actual numbers of Indians connected to the estates, for the plantations' owners had previously written letters requesting royal permission to bring in African slaves, swearing that all of their encomienda Indians were dead. Also, there was obvious confusion over just how to categorize the workers who were free Africans or people of mixed blood. As previously mentioned, none of the censuses included categories for mestizos or mulattos until 1582.

COMPARISON OF THREE SUGAR CANE PLANTATION CENSUSES						
<u>Year</u>	<u>Spaniards</u>	<u>Indians</u>	<u>Africans</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Ingenios</u>
1530	427	200+	1,870	700+?	3,197+	14
1533	412	200+	1,880	1,525+?	4,017+	23
1545	---	5,125+	3,827+	---	8,952+	29

Archbishop Alonso de Avila of Santo Domingo ordered a census taken to determine the number of chapels and clergymen required to service the twenty-three sugar cane plantations that there were on the island of Hispaniola by 1533. He reported that there were five plantations on the Río Nigua alone, plus several

cattle ranches. Altogether, Avila wrote that there were “at least” 700 Africans, 200 Indians (note that this is the same suspicious quantity provided in 1530), and 150 Spaniards who lived and worked in the region.⁷ For the 23 ingenios, Avila enumerated 1,880 Africans, 412 Spaniards, and 200 Indians.

That is the kind of ratio that other historians have cited, with Africans outnumbering Spaniards by almost five to one after 1520. The problem is that historians and demographers nearly always use only the quantities in the fixed categories and do not mention the “others” that the census takers made note of, nor the question marks, nor the other notes that indicate people outside the fixed categories. On his census, Avila reported 1,525 “others”--820 more “others” than in the 1530 count. In letters that accompanied the census, he wrote that these unspecified persons included some Spaniards, Africans, Indians, and he also admitted that there had been more persons that no one had included in the census. He wrote in other letters that those whom nobody enumerated were mostly Indians. Again, the implication is that the number of Indians on Hispaniola was being purposely misrepresented and that there was confusion over how to categorize people who did not fit specifically into one or another of the clear categories of Spaniard, Indian, or slave.

Twelve years after Avila’s census, in a report that the island’s governor don Alonso de Fuenmayor sent to Emperor Charles, there was only one more

⁷AGI, Justicia 12, 149, ff10v-15; full text of the census available in José Luis Sáez, ed., *La iglesia y el esclavo negro en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo, Colección Quinto Centenario, 1994), 267-272.

plantation listed on the Río Nigua, but the head count there alone had risen from 700 Africans to 962, and from 200 Indians to 1,212.⁸

Fuenmayor reported on a total of twenty-nine plantations and *trapiches* ("horse-powered mills"). It is notable that Africans only outnumbered the indigenous workforce on nine of the twenty-nine plantations. In total, he enumerated a little over 8,952 workers (he used the symbol "+" to indicate the additional numbers)--43% of them he identified as Africans and 57% as Indians. Fuenmayor enumerated more than 5,000 Indian slaves! The quantities listed in his report are suspect, of course, because they reflect such a dramatic increase in Indians over the 1530 and 1533 counts—the opposite of what would be expected.

There are other important differences between Fuenmayor's census and those of 1530 and 1533. He included among the "slaves" of the ingenios all the independent farmers that the other censuses mentioned separately.

Furthermore, Fuenmayor did not mention any "others," nor did he include

⁸The data is from Luis Joseph Peguero, *Historia de la Conquista de la Isla Española de Santo Domingo trasumptada el año de 1762: Traducida de la Historia General de las Indias escrita por Antonio de Herrera coronista mayor de su Magestad, y de las Indias, y de Castilla; y de otros autores que han escrito sobre el particular* (Santo Domingo: Publicaciones del Museo de Las Casas Reales, 1975; originally published 1763), 217-221. Peguero claims to have had access to the document written by Fuenmayor, who began compiling the information when he arrived on Hispaniola for his second term in office on Aug 3, 1545; but Peguero does not say how or where he encountered the document, which may have been in a private collection. I have not been able to locate it, nor a copy, in the AGI in Seville, Archivo General de la Nación in Santo Domingo, nor in other collections or published sources. Peguero noted that Fuenmayor's report took the ingenios' locations and their owners from the 1536 description in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdez's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (originally published in 1535), Book 4, Chp. 8. Oviedo, however, did not list quantities of workers and he had one additional ingenio listed, called Yaguata, owned by Francisco de Tapia, that Peguero/Fuenmayor did not mention.

question marks, nor workers of unspecified category—everybody was plunked into the category of “African slaves” or “Indian slaves.”

It could be that Fuenmayor, who came to his office directly from Spain, counted everyone on Hispaniola who had the least bit of Indian blood as “Indian,” without taking into account their education, appearance, and behavior, whereas locals would classify most of them as Spaniards if their education, appearance, and behavior were those of a Spaniard. Or maybe Fuenmayor was one of the first *peninsulares* who thought that he and others like him were superior by reason of their “pure blood,” while *criollos* were thought to be “tainted” with Indian blood. (Note that Alonzo López de Cerrato repeated the same suspicious quantity of “more than 5,000 Indian slaves” on the island that Fuenmayor wrote about in a letter to the emperor dated May 23, 1545.⁹ López was president of Hispaniola’s Royal Court and became governor of the island after Fuenmayor.)



Taínos fled to the peripheral parts of the island, to the deserts and mountains, such as this region in the Dominican Southwest around what was named Lago Enriquillo.

Not all of the Taínos who survived the island’s initial conquest and settlement were “slaves”; some didn’t even work for or live with the Spaniards. In various legal documents of the era, Spaniards testified that an uncountable

⁹Letter to the crown. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo 49, R16, N101; cited in Mira Caballos, *El indio antillano*, 290.

number of Taínos ran away from the Spaniards. Some of the maroons left for other islands or the mainland. Others hid out in the mountains and desert regions of Hispaniola, preferring to leave behind their fertile river valleys and remain free in less hospitable terrain. Remember that by the middle of the sixteenth century, the majority of the Spaniards had pulled back to Santo Domingo and its nearby towns. In 1555, a Spanish patrol discovered four entire towns “full of Indians about which no one previously knew,” one near Puerto Plata, another, very near it on the Atlantic Coast, one on the Samaná Peninsula, and another in the northeastern part of the island at Cape St. Nicholas.¹⁰

Apparently, after fifty-some years, the Indian maroons had decided they could come back to the fertile coasts and valleys of the north that the Spaniards had abandoned. I doubt very much, however, that the inhabitants of those four towns full of “Indians” were full-blooded Taínos. Doubtlessly some had Spanish fathers and Spanish grandfathers, and others had African fathers and grandfathers--the same royal documents that provide evidence of innumerable runaway Taínos, as well as all the documents concerning the 15-year-long rebellion of Enriquillo, provide evidence that African slaves ran away and joined the Indians, learning from them how to survive in what was, for them, a foreign land. All had contributed to what it means today to be Dominican.

Lots of areas still need to be researched, many questions about identity and ethnic categories need to be answered, but I hope that, at least, I have been able to clear up the myth of the extinction of the Taínos and the myth that all Dominicans and their culture are Spanish. Dominicans exhibit a tripartite

¹⁰ Consejo de Indias advisory dated July 31, 1556. *CDIU*, Vol. 18, 10.

biological and cultural inheritance: Spanish, indigenous, and African. The myth of the superiority of all things Spanish has its foundations in a history that has been distorted over the past 500 years, the years of the Conquest and the ascendance of Europeans to the top of the world economic stage. The history has been distorted because the historians who wrote it were also European conquistadors, and they confused economic superiority with social and cultural superiority.

I hope that you all take advantage of speaking with the special guests who are with us today, like Román Pérez and his family—unfortunately my friend Jorge Estevez from the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian could not attend. They are Dominicans who live in the United States. There they have learned to value their indigenous inheritance. They can tell you details of their Taíno inheritance, things about their culture that have survived for more than 2,000 years, despite Spanish domination for the past 500 years—things that form an important part of the Dominican culture not just of the past, but also of the present.
