Images of Presence, Texts of Absence: Internet Engagements, Strategies of Representation, and the Indigenous Caribbean Resurgence

Dr. Maximilian C. Forte
Assistant Professor in Anthropology
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.
Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8
Canada
E-mail: mcforte@kacike.org

Images of Presence, Texts of Absence: Internet Engagements, Strategies of Representation, and the Indigenous Caribbean Resurgence

Abstract

The "field" of Caribbean anthropology is rapidly changing in new and challenging ways given two phenomena that are ontologically distinct yet joined in practice. On the one hand, the region is witnessing the organization and reassertion of aboriginal identities to an extent that surprises and perplexes social scientists. After all, the Caribbean has long been heralded as a site for creolization, hybridity, post-modernity, and one marked by the impossibility of primordial, pre-colonial attachments. On the other hand, the "field" as a bounded site is itself being transformed by a shift in the way information is engaged, accessed and constructed given the increasingly pervasive presence of the Internet in the region itself and especially throughout the Caribbean diaspora. At the intersection of these two transformations, this article will focus on Caribbean aboriginal self-representations on the Internet. We will examine the ways in which visual representations are mobilized to counter old textual "truths" of extinction and, indeed, how the visual is used to rework and reinterpret the textual in the assertion of new truths of cultural survival and aboriginal presence.

'That which is visible is only ever that which is legible'-----Pierre Bourdieu (1999: 163)

'Siting' Indigeneity

As far as anthropologists and historians interpret it, the social and cultural landscape of the Caribbean has been changing in some remarkable ways over the past two decades, especially if we consider two relatively novel realizations in the academic literature on the

region: the renewal of indigenous identifications and the import of new media. The Caribbean region, including its diaspora in North America, is witnessing the organization and reassertion of aboriginal identities to an extent that surprises and perplexes at least some social scientists. After all, the Caribbean has long been heralded as the *locus classicus* of creolization, hybridity, post-modernity, and one marked by the impossibility of primordial, pre-colonial attachments (Khan, 2001; Robotham, 1998). In addition, anthropological notions of the "field" as a bounded, geographic locus of experience and knowledge is one that is being transformed by a shift in the way information is engaged, accessed and produced given the increasingly pervasive presence of the Internet in the region itself and especially throughout the Caribbean diaspora (see also Amit, 2000).

With respect to the first part of the problem addressed here, the purported absence of an indigenous demographic or cultural heritage especially in the Greater Antilles region (composed of what are today known as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and other islands of the northern Caribbean), there has been widespread repetition in the literature of the assertion that the region's indigenous peoples became extinct within a few short decades of the arrival of Spanish colonizers from 1492 onwards. Extinction, therefore, is a central theme in academic and even popular literature, reproduced today via new media such as online encyclopaedias and various electronic papers. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* and the *Columbia Encyclopaedia* are just three examples of sources that have moved online and continue to teach students and others that the Taíno Indians of the Greater Antilles basically died off within 50 years of first contact. School texts used within the Anglophone Caribbean have traditionally adopted the extinction theme as well (e.g. Watson, 1982), especially with reference to the Taíno, usually cast as docile and submissive, as opposed to their 'cannibalistic' and 'war-like' neighbours, the Caribs (who are usually recognized as having survived in small numbers in places such as Dominica and St.

Vincent). In the face of contemporary organizations and individuals who assert the survival of the Taíno, it is not surprising to find scholars today who look at such persons with suspicion, disbelief, and as the subject for hostile critiques (e.g. Haslip-Viera, 1999). This literature has come in for serious questioning and has largely been undone by the work of contemporary scholars, who explicitly reject what they call the 'myth of Taíno extinction'. Examples of such works include Barreiro (1989, 1997) and Guitar (1998, 2002) focusing on Taíno cultural survival in Cuba and the Dominican Republic respectively, or the work of Juan Carlos Martinez Cruzado, a population geneticist, whose DNA surveys in Puerto Rico have revealed that an astounding 61 per cent of the population has some pre-Columbian, Taíno ancestry (see *DRLAS*, 2000; Martinez Cruzado, 2002). By and large, however, the textual 'truths' of *absence* have been preserved in the mainstream academic literature to date.

The other side of this problematique concerns indigenous self-representations on the Internet, a development that is almost as novel (or old) as the inception of the World Wide Web itself. The dominant theme of contemporary Taíno websites is summarized precisely, and not surprisingly given the above, in the proclamation, 'we are not extinct'. As if to emphatically strike at popular realist notions of 'show me the proof', these Taíno websites have done just that. Indeed, it is also a dominant feature of Taíno websites that they are, in many cases, simply laden with images (photographs and artistic illustrations), with images easily outweighing text. Moreover, the Internet is by far the preferred mode of communication for most of the contemporary Taíno organizations as well as for individuals Taínos.

The perspectives enunciated on many of these sites go against the entrenched mainstream that upholds the ideology of extinction, an ideology founded on the notions that inferior peoples die out in the wake of Western progress, or that 'culture', like an apparent organism rather than a system of meanings, can 'die'. Taíno websites, to widely varying

degrees to be sure, acknowledge that cultural change and migration has occurred, but not for that are they any less indigenous, nor do they surrender the right to define themselves. A number of sites might strike some viewers as somewhat defensive, seeking to overcompensate by asserting uninterrupted continuities from the past, but one also has to understand that for several years now many of these webmasters have been engaged in pitched intellectual battles with various hostile detractors, whether academics or members of the general public. The most common, indeed predictable, accusation levelled against contemporary Taíno organizations is that their members are seeking to be something other than 'black' (race is also in the eye of the beholder, as their alleged 'blackness' in most cases is simply not apparent to me), and that they are motivated by a sinister agenda to acquire recognition so they can open a casino. Unfortunately, such exchanges, whether in various newsgroups or 'spoken' by unidentified editors with *Wikipedia*, implicitly speak to the contemporary reproduction of notions of 'Indianness' as needing to be static, fixed in place, and mired in poverty before it can be accepted as 'authentic'.

At the intersection of these two sides of the problematique—texts of alleged absence and images of asserted presence—this article will focus on Caribbean aboriginal self-representations on the Internet, specifically how images of presence are today used to counter yesterday's texts of absence. I thus agree with the perspective that sees visual culture as integral to ideologies and power relations, whereby images are used for 'regulation, categorization, identification, and evidence' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 22). I will thus examine the ways in which visual representations are mobilized to counter, in manifold ways, old textual "truths" of extinction and, indeed, how the visual is used to rework and reinterpret the textual in the assertion of new truths of cultural survival and aboriginal presence. Indeed, a central premise of this article is that the construction and presentation of these images plays a central role in the very substantiation and maintenance of contemporary Taíno culture. In

the process, I aim to shed some light on the ways that visual anthropological insights and approaches can be directed at the study of representations using new media.

<u>Frames of Analysis</u>

It is a truism to speak of the 'power of images' in popular discourse in North America. It is not surprising that contemporary Taíno representatives have made strategic choices of representation, focusing on images of presence, survival, and continuity. I say 'strategic' given the fact that North American culture, like many others, is one that is increasingly visual and image-mediated, with images playing a central role in representation, the construction of meaning and communication (see Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 1). Likewise, Pink observes that images are 'inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth' (2001: 17). The analytical frame that I adopt for this study is admittedly partial, in that not all possible modes of visual analysis are adopted, nor are most of the theories and methodologies of visual anthropology addressed. Instead, my focus is on 'external narratives' (Banks, 2001), or what I call *context analysis*, coupled with an interest in the range of potential denotative meanings conveyed by select images of indigeneity. Context analysis, in my view, should precede content analysis or ethnographic interviewing with image-makers. Context analysis highlights those features of the production and circulation of an image, and its intended consumption, that in turn throw light on the image, highlighting aspects thus revealed as 'content' worth analysing. This procedure then shapes the questions that will have a bearing on the ethnography itself. This, for now, is the initial phase of a broader project that I am currently developing concerning the multiple ways in which indigeneity is rendered visible/legible.

The concept of 'legibility' here comes from Bourdieu, who explained that the '*legibility* of the picture itself is a function of the legibility of its intention (or of its function)', and involves the extent to which the aesthetic judgment to which the picture gives rise 'is more favourable the more total the expressive adequacy of the signifier to the signified' (1999: 174). For something to be legible means that to a significant extent it has to be understood by a wider community of interpreters who share certain basic codes in common. Though the notion of 'shared culture' has certainly fallen into disrepute in various spheres of anthropological theory, giving way to notions of agency and contestation, clearly some codes must be shared for any kind of communication and inter-subjective agreement to occur, to the extent that these do in fact occur. To the extent that we can speak of the legibility of images, we are inevitably dealing with what Marcus Banks highlights as the external narrative of images: 'the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing' (Banks, 2001: 11). The content of an image instead, read for either its connotative or denotative meanings (see Barthes, 1999), is the 'internal narrative' of an image. A conceptualization of external narrative can also build on expressive strategies to understanding authorial intention, where the context within which the image was produced assumes prominence (Banks, 2001: 10-11).

The context within which images, such as the ones discussed in this article, are produced is critical to understanding not only why images are *produced*, but also specifically why *those* images have been produced. In explaining context analysis, Banks thus argues that to understand why an image even exists, 'we must move beyond the content and consider the image as an object' (2001: 3). Banks thereby situates images as being 'highly contingent upon the circumstances of their production' (2001: 17). Context allows viewers to associate certain meanings with certain images, rendering the images 'legible': 'we may learn to associate certain visual images with certain meanings…these are normally highly context

dependent' (Banks, 2001: 10). The audience, 'educated to expect by convention' (Banks, 2001: 10), may interpret particular images to have special meanings which they have been trained to recognise and which form part of a larger cultural repertoire that has been socially disseminated by various institutions, such as schools or the mass media for example. As Sturken and Cartwright put it: 'the capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed' (2001: 25).

Taíno webmasters certainly know their North American audience particularly well. First, they themselves constitute members of that audience, as migrants living in the United States, former residents of Puerto Rico, which is a dependent territory of the US. They live in the 'belly of the beast', as José Martí, the nineteenth century Cuban nationalist and former resident of New York City characterised living there. Contemporary Taínos thus also live with their audience. Second, in terms of their familiarity with images of Native American indigeneity that are 'legible' to most members of their surrounding audience, many of today's Taínos had Native Americans as their 'neighbours' in many senses. As outlined by Arlene Dávila, 'most of them had either migrated to the US during their early youth or were born and raised in the US…. it was in the United States that most of the Taínos recouped their indigenous identity…in some cases directly instilled by experiences in the United States. For some, it was triggered by their experiences with the Native American movement' (1999: 19). A number of Taínos had worked on Native American publications, served as translators to Central and South American indigenous delegations to the United Nations, and participated in Native American pow-wows and other activities.

<u>Fieldwork</u>

The fieldwork, both offline and online, that forms the research base out of which this article emerges has continued off and on from 1998, in different phases and for different durations, and not according to a pre-determined plan to select visual cultural themes for eventual analysis and publication. The offline component stems from 40 months of fieldwork with the Santa Rosa Carib Community (SRCC) in Arima, Trinidad, on a wide range of issues of representation concerning the reproduction of Carib identities in Trinidad, with a focus on local, national and international interactions, from colonial times to the present (Forte, 2005). In the process, as part of a reciprocal exchange agreement where I agreed to do whatever work I could on behalf of the Carib Community, I inquired as to whether they would wish to have a website prepared for the SRCC as I had at least some limited skills in website design. The first SRCC website was in fact created by September of 1998, and has changed several times since, both in content and design, while my skills, limited as they are, constantly improved. For the past two years, the SRCC site at http://www.kacike.org/srcc/index.html has in fact stabilized in terms of both content and appearance.

As a result of this offline-to-online transition, a different set of research dynamics set in as I developed new networks of interaction that occurred online alone (see Forte, 2004), especially as I soon encountered a variety of Taíno websites whose online presence predated that of the SRCC by at least two years. Given my own presence online as the SRCC's 'webmaster', as well my active involvement in producing and maintaining the *Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink* (http://www.centrelink.org) and *Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology* (http://www.kacike.org/), this dimension of my fieldwork found me immersed online in daily participant observation and has never truly come to an end, nor do I experience or conceive of it anymore as deliberate and goal-oriented 'fieldwork'. Over the past seven years I have corresponded with several Taíno webmasters,

visited their sites regularly and looked at how they were transformed over time, and I have participated with a number of these Taíno webmasters in various online discussion fora and listservs. In the process, I also entered into collaborative working relationships with the few scholars that exist who are actively highlighting Taíno cultural survival in the Greater Antilles, including José Barreiro, Lynne Guitar, Pedro Ferbel, and Jorge Estevez at the National Museum of the American Indian, who is himself a self-identified Taíno from the Dominican Republic who regularly explains Taíno cultural survivals on the level of daily lived practices in the rural areas of his home country, as well as in actual biological descent, as he himself has strongly verified through voluntary DNA testing.

From among dozens of Taíno webmasters, I have sustained correspondence over the years with the leadership and the webmasters of the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation, Biaraku, and Coqui's Village. I have conducted formal interviews with Virginia Rosario of Biaraku and Francisco Baerga of Coqui's Village. The websites at the heart of this article are those of Biaraku: First People of a Sacred Place at http://www.biaraku.com; Coqui's Village at http://www.indio.net/; the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation of Boriken at http://www.Taíno-tribe.org/jatiboni.html, and the related Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Longhouse at http://www.Taíno-tribe.org/caney.html; and finally Baramaya at http://baramaya-Taíno.com/. This is not intended to be a 'representative sample', except for the fact that these are the sites that have made regular and consistent use of imagery over the years and that have attracted my attention for their often sophisticated and ingenious deployment of photographs and computer graphics.

'Imagi-Native': Indigenous Presence via the Internet

As noted by Christensen (2003) and Nakamura (2002), one of the dominant themes in the literature on culture and inter-personal interactions in 'cyberspace' has been that of disembodiment, of the Internet working to uproot identities from physical bodies, and disentangling images from realities, resulting in 'virtuality'. Even the Internet then would seem to portend a form of extinction, where the aboriginal body is rendered absent. This, however, is not the case.

In general terms, Nakamura adapts concepts from Lev Manovich in speaking of cultural categories and concepts being remastered to suit the ontological, epistemological and pragmatic conditions of new media, referring to this process as 'transcoding' (2002: 2-3). Outlining the ways that 'race' has been transferred online, Nakamura concludes that 'postmortems pronounced over "the body" are premature' (2002: 11). In addition, the presentation of images serves to root bodies in places, countering any potential 'disembodiment' that celebratory corporate ideologies of the Internet tended to promote. In the specific case of Inuit engagements with cyberspace, Christensen calls attention to the fact that 'Inuit and others continue referring to ethnic, geographic, linguistic and national boundaries in their attempts to configure the sensation of space as they know it' (2003: 51). He notes how the Inuit have 'reterritorialised' themselves in cyberspace by 'reasserting and defining boundaries consistent with offline space; displaying images of the Arctic nature, its animals, pinpointing their geographical positions on maps and more' (Christensen, 2003: 55). The result, as he argues, is that the Internet has had a cultural and identity-affirming impact on the Inuit, insofar as the Inuit *embed* their identities and cultures on the Web (Christensen, 2003: 12). 'Physicality' plays a strong role in Inuit WebPages (Christensen, 2003: 12). Indeed, the Internet has been adapted by the Inuit to reaffirm their cultural identities in much

the same way that they have adapted previous forms of media, such as film and television (see Christensen, 2003: 17-18; Ginsburg, 2002; Roth, 2002).

The concept of 'virtuality' also poses certain analytical problems, especially to the extent that we understand virtuality to mean the sense of 'being both related to *and* increasingly "disconnected" from [a] formal referent' (Geschiere and Meyer, 1998: 606). Francisco Baerga's digital images in Coqui's Village almost look like photographs. In fact, as he explained to me: 'I work mostly with Photoshop using digital photos from scenes that I have photographed in sacred places and in my travels and 3D programs'. For some, this suffices as a basis for concluding that what has been produced is a simulation, borrowing from the work of Jean Baudrillard (see Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 20, 139). Sturken and Cartwright also observe that there is a common misconception of 'virtuality' as being synonymous with 'not real' or as something that exists only in the imagination. Their own approach to this problem is a little ambiguous. On the one hand, they note that 'virtual images' (which seems to be an awkwardly tautological phrase) break with the 'convention of representing what is seen', in that they are 'are simulations that represent ideal or constructed rather than actual conditions' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 144). On the other hand, they also note that this degree of virtuality is not exclusive to the Internet 'photographs have been manipulated since their invention' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 145). Indeed, one might argue that all photographs, by their very nature as a selective and constructed representation masked as a recording, are always the product of manipulation. As Bourdieu argued this, 'photography captures an aspect of reality which is only ever the result of an arbitrary selection, and, consequently, of a transcription' (1999: 162). What digital imaging allows an author to do, I would argue, is to maximise the potential for manipulation, to truly draft imaging into the service of deliberate representation as a result of having utilized further levels and techniques of editing that digital technologies allow. Remastered images of Taíno

identity preserve the content of the original referents while optimizing them for a new format (see Nakamura, 2002: 18).

Virtual Territory

In contrast, many of the Taíno web designers and supportive scholars see the theme of 'extinction' itself in terms of virtuality: a representation disconnected from a referent based in reality. By placing us imaginatively in a specific landscape, a Puerto Rico recast in Taíno terms as *Boriken*, Taíno webmasters seek to battle the virtuality of extinction with the virtuality of digital presence. In this respect, the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation's website features a map of Boriken featuring pre-colonial territorial districts organised under different chiefs. The modern flag of Puerto Rico is overlaid with an image of a Taíno warrior. Other pictures on the site include an animated photograph of a hummingbird, a creature of significance not just as a fixture in the Island Caribbean ecology but in Taíno cosmology as well. Speaking of the Inuit, Christensen notes that, 'the sense of home and belonging does not necessarily suffer from the increase of contact to the surrounding world' (2003: 17). In fact, I would argue, this sense of home and belonging can be resolutely heightened as a result of such contact. It is perhaps not accidental then that all of the Taíno websites are constructed by *Boricua* who reside in the US, whose experience outside of their homeland may have rendered them, in more ways than one, more 'native' than the 'natives' who remained at home and who largely shun Taíno identity. I agree with Christensen in arguing that 'even though the sense of home is generally described as something that is local, it is also asserted in places and situations that are located and take place far away' (2003: 17). Indeed, Christensen is quite right to repeat a simple tenet of modern anthropological theories of ethnicity—'cultural identities are not upheld in isolation' (Christensen, 2003: 16)—for it is *precisely because* of such contacts with Others that the US-based Boricua have been able to

forge a sense of their own indigeneity. What the Taíno websites do, collectively, is to produce

boundaries of Taíno identity anchored in landscape, nature, specific territories, history, and

knowledge of pre-colonial cosmology as well as Taíno vocabulary. All of these elements are

actively reproduced online, as if to provide what Ginsburg (2002) would call 'screen

memories'—an active membrane that acts as yet another means by which the Taíno

enculturate and socialise their own members and young ones.

Governmentality

A few Taíno websites, especially those pertaining to the three main political

organisations with a presence on the Web (the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation [JTTN] already

mentioned, as well as the United Confederation of Taíno People [UCTP] at

http://www.uctp.org, and the Taíno Nation of the Antilles at http://nacion_taina.tripod.com/),

emphasise themes of governmentality and political representation. Once again, the use of

images, where they are in fact used, is neither accidental nor 'natural'—choice was actively

exercised. As Banks argued this point, 'representations that humans make when they paint on

canvas or animal skin, or when they click the shutter on a camera, are discrete—the products

of specific intentionality' (2001: 7). Both the JTTN and the UCTP mentioned above present

'official seals' of their respective organisations. The JTTN has gone a step further by also

producing a Taíno flag, prominently shown at the top of its entry page, a flag that evolved

from an earlier logo featuring a rainbow. From his own observations of indigenous self-

representations on the Internet, Harald Prins indicates that, 'Fourth World governments often

mark their sites with a tribal seal, flag, or some other official insignia' (2002: 71), in which

case these Taíno webmasters are in keeping with broader trends of indigeneity on the

Internet. What they also do, in the absence of full and formal recognition from the US Federal

Government, is to show by graphic means the many ways in which both organisations have

approximated official recognition. Typically, photographic reproductions of actual records are produced. For example, the UCTP points to documents the US Congress, the State of New York, and the US Census Bureau that explicitly recognise, applaud or thank the UCTP for its work in various venues. The JTTN features a prominent graphical link to a governmental website that lists US tribal governments, a list in which it is included.

Locality

Other Taíno websites are manifestly disinterested in issues of formal governance and official politics. *Coqui's Village*, mentioned before, is a primarily image-driven website, and one that is entirely unique among Taíno websites for its use of computer-generated graphics that have photographic resemblances. As the title of the site suggests, the focus here is on the village level. Indeed, a village of huts is the main graphic greeting visitors to the site's main page. In the past the graphic was much larger, allowing visitors to click on an individual hut, which would bring them to a subdirectory of http://www.indio.net, in effect a separate site maintained by one of the members of the 'village'. I was always personally struck by these images, especially for how they used the technology of the 'global village' to instead produce a 'local village', in ways that reminded me of Manuel Castells' thesis, '*we are not living in a global village, but in customised cottages globally produced and locally distributed*' (2000: 370, emphasis in the original). I will return to Coqui's Village later.

Biaraku, mentioned previously, has gone from being a graphics-dominated website several years ago, to one that uses images only minimally today. Indeed, dial up connections in the past would have had to labour in downloading the dozens of image pieces that went into making the front page, where every aspect of the page was graphic, including text. Biaraku has done an impressive job of richly conveying the flora and fauna of the Caribbean, of creating a natural aura that grounds the notion expressed in the site's subtitle, 'First People

of a Sacred *Place'* (emphasis added). In an interview with me, conducted via e-mail, Virginia Rosario (the site's designer and lead graphic artist) explained, 'as an artist I get bored by the same images so the site has been revamped several times'. In fact, she added, 'the site has been in existence since 1999, which makes it old by web standards. It has been redesigned four times since then'. There was a practical reason as well for focusing on images of foliage, frogs (also important in Taíno cosmology), forest scenes, and so forth: 'in the beginning I didn't have too many images so I used my own artwork and images of nature'. Images of wider variety now appear on the pages of the site, many of them ethnographic and of persons. These images are also rooted in locality, as Virginia noted: 'since I travel to Boriken I take my own images (especially at festivals) and have used them on the site', thereby maintaining an actual physical referent to her homeland.

My own work in producing the website of the Santa Rosa Carib Community in Trinidad, an organisation officially recognised and funded by the state, involved my reading some of the key external narratives of indigeneity and locality in Trinidad and then trying to find the graphical means that would correspond (more or less). Duality in representation played a role in my choices. I know that members of the Carib Community do not see themselves as separate and apart from the wider nation and can be avidly nationalistic, with almost all members either voting for the country's first nationalist party which led Trinidad and Tobago to independence, the People's National Movement, or actually being formal members of the PNM. However, it is also a community that casts itself in ethnic terms of course. Thus the choice of dominant colours for the site—red, black and white—can be used in a dual sense. Some viewers will recognise the colours as those of then national flag. Others will recognise those colours as, coincidentally, being the same dominant natural pigments used by Amerindians in pre-Columbian painting of pottery as well as body decoration. Other

images on the site, graphic links to posters that can be purchased, feature themes of ethnic pride, in sometimes bold terms.

Inspired in large part by Biaraku, my work in designing academic sites such as the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink (or CAC, at http://www.centrelink.org/) and Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology (http://www.kacike.org/) uses coloration as the basic for evoking locality. The CAC predominantly uses earth and sky tones, while Kacike uses the colours of vegetation, mostly shades of green of course, while also using stylised palm motifs. Content analysis conducted by a visitor might have revealed these internal narratives, but without a grounding in the external narratives unveiled here, the logic of the construction could not have been as transparent.

History

History, of course, is as much a critical ingredient of indigeneity as locality, with its allusions to 'firstness' and the concomitants of cultural continuity. There is no universal recipe adopted by Taíno websites in depicting Taíno history. Some sites, such as the JTTN and Biaraku, feature photographs of an 'ethnographic' quality: elders shown engaged in traditional practices, such as making cassava bread or weaving, themes that are also feature on the Santa Rosa Carib website. These are ways of depicting cultural continuities.

There are also means, more popular across Taíno websites, of depicting the 'ancient historical roots' of Taíno culture. For example, the JTTN, the UCTP and Coqui's Village, all feature images of archaeological artefacts—e.g. *zemis* (three pointed, carved stone objects often shaped to represent a skeletal shamanic figure or a frog or turtle, the object reputed to hold the spirit of a deceased person) have an almost iconic value on these sites, objects that have struck many, Taínos and outsiders, as being of great beauty and inspiring fascination. Many of these objects are now housed in museums across Europe and North America. Taíno

petroglyphs are also quite popular across these sites, especially the image of Agueybana, a chiefly representation. Ironically, *Taíno Revival* (Haslip-Viera, 1999), containing a number of essays that are almost scornful of contemporary Taínos, nonetheless uses this same image on the cover of the book.

It is important to note that while some Taíno groups produce broader 'proof' of tradition and continuity, others stress identification through sentiment, not select traits. These sites will tend to emphasise images based on dreams, spirituality, and principles of communality and generosity (see also Dávila, 1999: 23-25). Francisco Baerga, the designer and author of Coqui's Village, certainly produces images depicting typical or core components of pre-colonial Taíno culture. As he explained in an interview with me, conducted via e-mail, he uses 'digital photos from scenes that I have photographed in sacred places and in my travels', thus decidedly physical referent is at the base of many of his images. But Francisco adds that more is at play here: 'I always sketched as a youngster but, when I began to have the visions of the images, I was very involved with computers and that became the means of re-creating my visions to share them with the rest of the world'. These photos may have an ethnographic and archaeological foundation, but they came to him mediated in the forms of visions. Francisco explains further: 'If you study the images set in pre-colonial times, they tell the story of the daily life of the Taínos before they were enslaved, tortured, assimilated and "almost" eliminated. I simply re-created my visions electronically'.

Some Taíno websites, especially those with aspirations to formal political recognition, have felt the need to deflect criticism—and this they do explicitly—that their organisations are merely recent fabrications without a history dating to before the 1990s. Pedro Guanikeyu Torres, the chief of the JTTN—and this will become relevant again in the next section— usually features himself in photos wearing what some might call traditional regalia, which includes feathered headdresses. As if to make it abundantly clear that this is not a '1990s

thing', he produces a photograph from almost three decades earlier, showing himself in much the same manner, graduating with his degree from Rutgers University. He attended the convocation ceremony in a feathered headdress and other forms of traditional costume.

The 'Primitive' Body

Depictions of the Taíno body can be very controversial for some, especially insofar as some feel provoked to speak of essentialism and racism, or primitivism in other cases. I personally do not think that there is a way of showing oneself as a member of an ethnic group in the US in a way that can ever be free of charges of essentialism and racism from some quarter, so to a certain degree this is a fruitless line of critique. What is more interesting to me is the line of inquiry pursued by Harald Prins, who observes and analyses the extent to which North American aboriginal self-representations have appropriated Eurocentric media myths of the 'noble savage' as part of 'counterhegemonic strategies of indigenous self-representation' (2002: 58). He argues that indigenous peoples recognise the primitivist formula and some actively draw upon it and reshape it to their own ends; primitivism may thus become a 'key element in their rhetoric of self-fashioning', showing up in their 'visual performatives' (Prins, 2002: 58). On the one hand, essentialist expectations of members of the wider society, seeking the 'true native', may provide the tools with which aboriginals forge a public identity as aboriginal (see for example, Lattas, 1993, for a sharp counter-critique of those who 'accuse' aboriginals of playing essentialist politics). On the other hand, what Prins is also arguing is that European media myths can also be excavated for indexical traces of actual indigenous practices and objects, which can then be reappropriated and reproduced by aboriginals in the present. It is not, therefore, a case of simply 'buying into' a dominant ideology, as it can also be a case of performing a kind of archaeology to salvage elements of an affectively valued past that have been embedded in images of that past.

One side of Prins' argument is that one indigenous strategy is to piggy-back on doxic representations of indigeneity, where dominant ideas can be seized upon as a ready-made means for indigenous persons to establish themselves as different. As he puts it quite succinctly: 'the pictorial genre of romantic exoticism provided them with an effective means of communicating the message that they, as the continent's indigenous peoples, represented a way of life utterly distinct from that of their white opponents. Without these pictures, there would be very little to remind future generations of what they had tried to preserve as guardians of their own ancestral heritage' (Prins, 2002: 62). Images of primitivism, validated by both Western elites and countercultural activists of the 1960s, provided a foundation for indigenous activists to create 'a new discursive space for cultural revitalization in their depressed communities' (Prins, 2002: 62). Visual media-makers, Prins notes, provided a kind of catalogue of documentary images that could then be re-read and appropriated: indigenous activists 'have resolved for themselves what these visual records really mean—reconnection to tradition and inspiration to reclaim and build upon what was lost' (Prins, 2002: 62). Pan-indigenism reflected in new hybrid visual representations, utilising colonial sources and shaping them to suit contemporary indigenous meanings, attests to a process of globalisation that results in creolisation, even new forms of indigenous creolisation, rather than homogenisation (see Hannerz, 1992).

Bourdieu perceived objectification as being an important social feature of photography, noting that in posing for photographs, for example, one is 'offering a regulated image of oneself [as] a way of imposing the rules of one's own perception' (Bourdieu, 1999: 168). In the event that there is a possible disjuncture between the authorial intention behind a presented image, then sometimes words can be resorted to make the intention clear: 'the title or the caption…states the signifying intention and allows one to judge whether the realization is in accordance with the explicit ambition' (Bourdieu, 1999: 174). Francisco Baerga

(Coqui's Village) has created several pages of computer-generated illustrations depicting what he sees as the traditional Taíno way of life—however, in the overwhelming majority of cases, he clearly opts to explain in words what he pictures are meant to show. After a fashion, what Francisco is doing is engaging in classical ethnographic narration: we, as outsiders, are presented with images of a 'strange way of life'; Baerga, informant turned narrator, helps us to 'make sense' of what we are seeing, the inevitable implication being that these must be images of difference if they need to be translated into words.

In terms of figuring the indigenous body, some of the Taíno websites have been rather suggestive about what they consider an 'indigenous-looking' person as actually looking like. The JTTN, for example, attracted the attention of Dávila (1999: 22), who noted the organisation's request that prospective members submit colour pictures of themselves, whilst also showcasing a young Taíno girl on one of their pages as presumably a representative face of the racial features of a Taíno. Other Taíno websites have instead been more than flexible in not depicting any one person or type as 'truly' representative of Taíno features. It is possible that the difference in strategy relates to the different purposes with which these sites are constructed. The JTTN presents itself as a tribal government website, where formalisation and registration can be expected to be dominant concerns.

For other sites, depictions of family gatherings, everyday events, celebrations, and scenes of outright joy are the mainstay, showing families united in festivities and commemorations, enjoying each other's presence. Two of the most representative of these sites have been Baramaya (mentioned before), which presents itself as the contemporary reconstruction of a Taíno village and kin group. The Baramaya site features an extensive montage of photographs of its events, families featured prominently, with select individuals also appearing in Taíno regalia. The main page is narrated by an audio recording on Taíno history, accompanied by chanting and drumming in the background. On one of its pages,

more of the members appear in what in overtly indigenous costume, flanked by representatives from other indigenous nations in the Amazon and North America, clearly as members of that same pan-indigenous community. One site not mentioned thus far, that of the Ciboney Tribe based in Florida (http://www.ciboneytribe.org/) and apparently composed of members of Cuban extraction, was one that in the past also featured digital photographs of their own gatherings. Members were not apparently too self-conscious of displaying all of the 'expected' outward signs of indigeneity. What was striking were the photographs of members clearly enjoying themselves, photographed in open-mouthed laughter at what appeared to be lavish celebrations. As the images depicted sheer joy, one envious colleague who viewed the images with me declared, 'I want to be a Ciboney too!' The site has changed significantly since I first encountered it at the end of the 1990s, adopting a more staid and less image-laden appearance than it has in the past.

Taíno webmasters, by and large, have shown an ability to synthesise colonial chronicles, extract what appears to be relatively objective information of everyday living practices from those chronicles, and then matching those reports with actual practices of other indigenous populations in the region, then cross-checked with archaeological evidence. Their display of knowledge of Taíno mythology and cosmology, agricultural practices, sports and dances, the histories of various chiefs and colonial history, exhibits a mastery of cultural knowledge that speak very strongly to the fact that they have been able to recapture (if they ever 'lost' it) and remodel Taíno culture to meet contemporary needs. Their mastery of sources, which is then condensed and codified into images, is used for teaching the cultural history of the Taíno to the young and to outsiders, and to mark themselves as holders of such knowledge, all while creating an ambience of affectivity, of identification and positioning.

Conclusion: Digital Visual Self-Determination

In certain respects, the Internet has been a boon for at least some indigenous groups, especially those aiming for heightened visibility and wider recognition. Images of Taíno life are clearly meant to be circulated and disseminated. Francisco Baerga speaks of presenting 'visual scenes of Taíno life with the hopes of fostering awareness and promoting interest in the Taíno culture', and he reports that he has had much success in attracting kind attention. His aim is not to reject modernity outright as it is to not simply cave in: 'though we live in a very modern world, we need to remember where we came from and recognize the great accomplishments and the overwhelming challenges faced by our people'. Like other Taíno webmasters, he emphasizes the 'need to work together to correct the erroneous myths of our people and culture and share the knowledge'.

Christensen went as far as to characterise the impact of new media among the Inuit as producing the bases for 'a Web of self-determination' (Christensen, 2003: 18). Self-determination has been translated and extended to self-representation, as Prins noted: 'indigenous peoples committed to cultural survival have increasingly staked claims on their rights not only of self-determination but also of self-representation' (2002: 70). What I would add is that the Internet offers more than just a simple extension or straightforward projection of offline social and cultural realities. Those offline realities are not just embedded online in a direct sense. With the Internet there is more room for planning and for self-editing, in no way like a normal spoken conversation. The Webmaster inevitably plays a role greater than that of messenger alone, which if one is conducting an ethnography of media production certainly renders the Webmaster the key informant.

Showing Taíno culture online acts to ensure its existence for those engaged in its production—the process of self-representation online provides a community of shared symbols and common markers that can be traced across several distinct websites. Following

the work of Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu, culture can be seen as a set of processes, of shared practices—thus, the 'proof' of there being a 'living' Taíno culture is not simply an *outcome*, a result, a bundle of tangible goods. The proof of Taíno culture is *in the process*, in the practice itself. Making images and disseminating them has come to be a shared practice common to many Taíno websites, and this reality alone can be said to point to the presence of Taíno culture, proving itself, in fact, in the practice of proving itself. As Sturken and Cartwright tell students, 'culture is a process, not a fixed set of practices or interpretations' (2001: 4).

I would argue that far from disembodiment, indigenous engagements with the Internet present us with cases of re-embodiment through the use of imagery. Far from abstract space, we witness visual means of re-territorialisation. These processes and practices of re-embodiment and re-territorialisation can, especially for resurgent groups with dispersed community members, combine to form a new means of retribalisation.

References

Amit, Vered, 2000, 'Introduction: Constructing the Field', in (ed) Vered Amit, *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*, Routledge, London, pp. 1-18.

Banks, Marcus, 2001, *Visual Methods in Social Research*, Sage, London.

Barreiro, José, 1989, 'Indians in Cuba', *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 56-60.

Barreiro, José, 1997, 'Taíno ascendant: extinction, continuities and reassertions', mimeograph.

Barthes, Roland, 1999, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in (eds) Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage, London, pp. 33-40.

Bourdieu, Pierre, 1999, 'The Social Definition of Photography', in (eds) Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage, London, pp. 162-180.

Castells, Manuel, 2000, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford.

Christensen, Neil Blair, 2003, *Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online*, Museum Tusculanum Press/University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen.

Dávila, Arlene, 1999, 'Local/Diasporic Taínos: Towards a Cultural Politics of Memory, Reality and Imagery', in (ed) Gabriel Haslip-Viera, *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York, pp. 11-29.

DRLAS, 2000, 'Some Important Research Contributions to the Study of Population History and Anthropology in Puerto Rico: Interview with Dr. Juan Carlos Martinez Cruzado', *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, August. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.udel.edu/LASP/Vol1-2MartinezC.html.

Forte, Maximilian C., 2004, 'Co-Construction and Field Creation: Website Development as both an Instrument and Relationship in Action Research', in (ed) Elizabeth Buchanan, *Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies*, Idea Group, Hershey, PA, pp. 222-248.

Forte, Maximilian C., 2005, *Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs: (Post) Colonial Representations of Aboriginality in Trinidad and Tobago*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

Geschiere, Peter and Meyer, Birgit, 1998, 'Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure', *Development and Change*, vol. 29, pp. 601-615.

Ginsburg, Faye, 2002, 'Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media', in (eds) Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 39-57.

Guitar, Lynne A., 1998, 'Myth Management: An Historian Examines How and Why the Myth of Taíno Extinction Began', mimeograph.

Guitar, Lynne A., 2002, 'Documenting the Myth of Taíno Extinction', *Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology*, December. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.kacike.org/GuitarEnglish.html.

Hannerz, Ulf, 1992, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Haslip-Viera, Gabriel (ed), 1999, *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York.

Khan, Aisha, 2001, 'Journey to the Center of the Earth: The Caribbean as Master Symbol', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 3, August, pp. 271-302.

Lattas, Andrew, 1993, 'Essentialism, Memory and Resistance: Aboriginality and the Politics of Authenticity', *Oceania*, vol. 63, pp. 240-267.

Martinez Cruzado, Juan Carlos, 2002, 'The Use of Mitochondrial DNA to Discover Pre-Columbian Migrations to the Caribbean: Results for Puerto Rico and Expectations for the Dominican Republic', *Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology*, December. Retrieved March 3, 2005, from http://www.kacike.org/MartinezEnglish.html.

Nakamura, Lisa, 2002, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet,* Routledge, New York.

Pink, Sarah, 2001, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, Sage, London.

Prins, Harald E. L., 2002, 'Visual Media and the Primitivist Perplex: Colonial Fantasies, Indigenous Imagination, and Advocacy in North America', in (eds) Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila

Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, University of California Press, Berkley, pp. 58-74.

Robotham, Don, 1998, 'Transnationalism in the Caribbean: Formal and Informal', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 25, no. 2, May, pp. 307-321.

Roth, Lorna, 2002, 'First Peoples' Television in Canada's North: A Case Study of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network', in (eds) Paul Attallah and Leslie Regan Shade, *Mediascapes: New Patterns in Canadian Communication*, Thomson Nelson, Scarborough, Ont., pp. 295-310.

Sturken, Marita and Cartwright, Lisa, 2001, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Watson, Jack, 1982, *The West Indian Heritage: A History of the West Indies*, 2d ed, John Murray Publishers, London.