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Author(s): Piri Thomas and Suzie Dod

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# Puerto Rico — 500 Years Of Oppression

Piri Thomas and Suzie Dod

**T**HE INDIGENOUS ROOTS OF BORINQUEN (THE ORIGINAL NAME FOR PUERTO RICO) were trampled from the beginning of the European presence, when a lost sea captain named Christopher Columbus landed on the island and renamed it Puerto Rico 500 years ago.

The Arawak-speaking natives who greeted Columbus were Taino people, members of a larger island world that was the Taino civilization. (The people of the Arawak language family today still comprise one of the more widespread American indigenous cultures, with relatively large kinship nations in the Amazon and Orinoco river basins of South America [Barreiro, 1990a].) The Tainos were a peaceful people, living mostly on the shores as fishers, although they also developed agriculture, were seafaring, and had a cosmology. Generosity and kindness were dominant social values and their culture was geared toward sustainable interaction with their natural surroundings (*Ibid.*). The Tainos had been designated as “primitive” by Western scholarship, yet their way of life prescribed both feeding all the people and respecting spiritually, in ceremony, most of their main animal and food sources, as well as natural forces such as climate, season, and weather. Nature was bountiful to them, and they, in turn, were generous (*Ibid.*).

Columbus met this generosity with untrammelled greed. In the name of Spain he claimed the Taino’s land and opened the door for Western exploiters to colonize the island. They came in droves: soldiers, money-hungry entrepreneurs, priests, and opportunists, all burning with a fever that only gold could cool. The native men, women, and children were forced to build huge fortifications and to dig for precious gold. Within 50 years, Columbus and those who followed him had reduced the native populations to near extinction through murder, enslavement, and disease, although not before some interbreeding took place, largely through the rape of Taino women. Speaking of Puerto Rico and Jamaica, Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote:

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**PIRI THOMAS** is a writer, poet, and activist for social justice living in the Bay Area. **SUZIE DOD** is on the Editorial Board of *Social Justice* and works on the journal’s staff. They can be reached at 964 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707.

Before the Spaniards there had lived on these islands more than six hundred thousand souls, it has been stated. I believe there were more than one million inhabitants [current research establishes the number at closer to eight million — *eds.*], and now, in each of the two islands, there are no more than two hundred persons, all the others having perished... (1992: 43).

Puerto Rico and Jamaica are “both now deserted and devastated” (*Ibid.*: 30).

To replace the indigenous people, enslaved Africans were brought to the Caribbean islands in the same European-forged chains that dragged other native Africans to the cotton fields of the South of the United States. Later, large numbers of Chinese were also brought to the Caribbean as cheap labor, one minuscule step removed from the bonds of human slavery. This combination of races began forming the cultural basis for nationhood.

Ethnically, Puerto Ricans are a mixture of Mediterranean (mostly Spanish), African, Chinese, and what elements survived the genocide of the Caribbean Taino/Arawak civilization. In Puerto Rico, no pure Tainos are known to exist today, although there are some groups of Indian descendants living in *caseríos* (public housing projects) in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Barreiro, 1990b). Moreover, throughout the Caribbean, usually in remote mountain regions and coastal promontories, remnant groups and communities of Taino-Arawak (and Carib) descendants survive to the present. In Puerto Rico, the only extant cultural remnants are to be found in the names of locations and certain foods still consumed by the now more Spanish-identified population. Moreover, some aspects of the Taino animistic and material culture have been interwoven into the Euro-African fabric of the islands' folk universe (*Ibid.*).

These few strands of indigenous culture were not perceived as such in the consciousness of the Puerto Rican people until anthropologists and members of independence movements began to rescue Puerto Rico's indigenous roots in recent years. However, even now, a type of discrimination creeps in, ranking Taino culture “lower” or “more primitive” than the Aztec, Maya, or Inca civilizations.

In spite of the efforts to reconstruct indigenous life in Puerto Rico as it was before the arrival of Columbus (extensive anthropological work, two museums), it remains an artifact of the past and few people feel a connection to it. In Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, or Ecuador large indigenous populations have managed to survive in spite of genocide and repression. Puerto Rico's indigenous legacy has been assimilated, however, although a visit to the Taino museums in Puerto Rico help to identify those elements of everyday life that Puerto Ricans owe to our indigenous ancestors. Moreover, identification of

digenous communities in the Caribbean (Cuba, Dominica, St. Vincent, Trinidad) is opening new doors to the real history of that region (*Ibid.*).

Racially, Puerto Rico is more of a “melting pot” than the United States, where the races have remained separate and in conflict, the basis of power lying with white supremacy. Moreover, throughout U.S. history, white supremacy has sustained its claim of “manifest destiny” with a discrimination bent on dehumanizing peoples of color — beginning with the Native Americans — and keeping them in bondage through intimidation and murder. By the time the U.S. grabbed Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898, it had become adept in the arts of oppression and imperialism. Thus, it was with ease that the U.S. seized Puerto Rico from a crippled Spain during the Spanish-American War, a war started when the United States, to create the illusion of a Spanish attack, allegedly sank its own ship, the U.S.S. *Maine*, in Cuban waters. Not surprisingly, the same General Miles who led the massacre of Wounded Knee now invaded Puerto Rico.

Since 1898, the U.S. has looked upon Puerto Rico as belonging to it, but hardly a part of it. Puerto Rico has always had an immense strategic value for the U.S. in terms of protecting the Panama Canal. The U.S. military has regarded Puerto Rico as its private testing ground and carried out bombardment training and weapons experimentation, causing severe damage to the people and the environment. Today, over 13% of the most arable land in Puerto Rico is occupied by U.S. military bases.

U.S. citizenship was forced on all Puerto Ricans by the Jones Act of 1917, but what the U.S. did not bargain for was the indomitable will of the Puerto Rican people to be free and independent. In 1868, Spain had confronted and crushed the First Republic, declared during the Grito de Lares Revolt, but the Puerto Rican nation’s aspirations for sovereignty had not been crushed. In 1921, the Nationalist Party was founded and organized what had previously been disorganized sentiment into a growing political movement, which was brutally repressed by the U.S. in 1937 and again in 1950 during the Jayuya Rebellion.

The U.S. further undermined Puerto Rico’s aspirations for independence through its plan of forced migration, in which guns and whips were replaced by economic pressure and the people of Puerto Rico were forced to separate from their homeland and come to the United States. The resultant breakup and separation of the family structure, and the loss of national identity, are due entirely to capitalist exploitation.

Today Puerto Rico’s economy is massively colonized. U.S. capital controls over 80% of Puerto Rico’s manufacturing, 60% of its banking, and 90% of its industrial imports. Forty-one percent of U.S. investments in Latin America are located in Puerto Rico and the profit returns of such investments equals 34% of all of Latin America. *Official* rates of unemployment are 15% to 18%.

Sixty-five percent of the people are on some kind of public assistance. This dependent economic system and the psychological oppression of colonialism have produced extreme social problems, including one of the highest rates of suicide, drug addiction, mental illness, and violent crime anywhere in the world. The standard of living for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora is four times lower than that of non-Latinos and lower still than other non-Puerto Rican Latinos in the United States. Over 37.9% of the Puerto Rican families living in the U.S. exist below the poverty level (Tribunal, 1989).

The Puerto Rican environment has been a longtime victim of U.S. exploitation. The incidence of respiratory illness, skin disease, allergies, and cancer associated with pollution and toxic wastes has reached epidemic proportions. Damage has been done to the soil, air, and water. Puerto Rico has been a sanctuary for U.S. multinationals, not only for profits, but also by being virtually exempt from environmental protection, regulation, and control. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency allows U.S. companies to dump wastes and pollute in Puerto Rico to an extent impermissible in the U.S. and the local Puerto Rican government has not been able to do anything about it. For example, the unique and invaluable El Yunque rain forest was used to test the chemical defoliant Agent Orange (of Vietnam infamy) and several underground water estuaries have been contaminated by petrochemical wastes (*Ibid.*). And the list goes on.

This is the legacy that the lost sea captain who called himself Christopher Columbus brought to Borinquen. Yet in spite of this legacy, the Puerto Rican independence movement struggles on. For years a thorn in the side of both the U.S. and Puerto Rican governments, the movement today continues to hammer away on environmental issues, the fight against government repression and harassment, including seeking the release of valuable imprisoned members such as Alejandrina Torres and Oscar López Rivera (among many others), and on the development of strategies, tactics, and alternative visions for a free Puerto Rico, independent of U.S. domination and control.



A final word from Piri Thomas: As a Puerto Rican born in the United States, I had to walk a hard road and make a long search that brought me, finally, to the realization of my identity and to take pride in my culture and heritage. I am Puerto Rican-Cuban-African-Taino-Spanish. As a child in the school system, I was not taught one thing about my people or our history. Only recently have we Puerto Ricans pried loose the lid on what we are as a people. It is obvious that for a people to know where they are going, they must first be secure in where they came from. We are humans who strive not just to exist, not just to survive, but to live as it is our right to live on this earth, knowing freedom is not just a word but a way of life.

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