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Prophetic repairs: Narrative and social action among Puerto Rican Taíno



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ABSTRACT

This article considers the sources of knowledge and frameworks of knowing from which Puerto Rican Taíno draw in order to support their identification as Taíno. Widespread, authoritative historical narratives of the Caribbean claim that the Taíno population was decimated between the 16th and 18th centuries. This analysis highlights the role that prophetic narratives and communicative strategies played in reframing and recalibrating Taíno historical tellings and in the refashioning of personal trajectories of social actors as Taíno.

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1. Introduction

Ideologies of and about time pervade projects of belonging. Whether it be genomic research hoping to uncover traces of and connections to the past in present bodies, or the writing and rewriting of histories that make claims upon groups and places, ideas about fixing some aspect of time are at play in making and mobilizing group identifications and projects (Benn Torres, 2014; Eisenlohr, 2004). These temporal projects of belonging not only look at the past, but also the future—the temporal significance of events is often established through narratives that encourage social action and mobilization on the behalf of a future certainty, although the timing of that certainty may remain unknown. Prophecy, the type of temporal narrative that this article focuses on, is of particular interest due to its role in placing future events into a coherent narrative that allows for revisions of the past as well.

I consider prophecy in the context of a Taíno indigenous organization in Puerto Rico. What makes this case a compelling one in which to analyze the temporal and mobilizing aspects of prophecy is that most widely circulating narratives about the Island insist that the Taíno did not survive the process of Spanish conquest and colonization (Duany, 2002; Gil de Lamadrid and Godreau, 2007; Haslip-Viera, 2001). Scholars and educators often espouse this view of the Taíno demise, making the contemporary claiming of a Taíno identity in Puerto Rico seem inconceivable to some, laughable to others, and a curiosity to many (Kuilan-Torres, 2005; Montero, 2005). Detractors will often cite the lack of Taíno visibility in the past centuries as evidence of the lack of contemporary Taíno. However, what if there were a prophecy that foretold such a lack of broad visibility and that also explained how the contemporaneous moment has lead the Taíno to publicly claim their identities as such? I explore this question by considering a prophecy that circulated among some Taíno, the *Prophecy of Aura Surey*. In line with recent research on chronotopes and interdiscursivity (e.g. Agha, 2007; Blommaert, 2015; Silverstein, 2005a; Wirtz, 2014), I consider prophecy to be a type of temporal narrative that re-inscribes the past and in doing so re-positions relations of power in the present, thus making possible different kinds of agencies toward the future.

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2. Intersubjectivity, narrative, prophecy and indigenous reclamation in Puerto Rico

Based on research conducted in Puerto Rico between 2006 and 2008, this article considers the myriad ways in which several social actors that identify as Puerto Rican Taíno draw from prophetic narratives to buttress their Taíno identifications. Rather than focus on the extinction and revival narrative that is often used to explain Puerto Rican Taíno trajectories by widespread and often hegemonic scholarly and popular narratives of Caribbean history, I consider the narrative frameworks and associated communicative ideologies that function as threads of repair that render Puerto Rican Taíno trajectories as flexible, continuous, and tellable. The power of this narrative framing is apparent in the way that it enables Puerto Rican Taíno to draw from and sustain a source of knowing that diverges from more standardized and widely acknowledged accounts of their history (see Trouillot, 1995 on Caribbean histories and power). Additionally, these narrative frameworks allow them to weave in new social actors and reframe events in ways that are significant in understanding social action and activism among Puerto Rican Taíno.

The main (re-)framing narrative that I analyze is the Prophecy of Aura Surey, a key prophecy among a number of (though not all) Puerto Rican Taíno groups particularly the General Council of Taíno (GCT), Guaka-ku (GK), and Liga Taína (LT).¹ While they did not all always get along—the politics of defining what and who counted as the right way to be Taíno in Puerto Rico at times seemed to obscure whatever commonalities they might have had—their agreement on this prophecy, particularly the way of understanding and framing events the prophecy offered, stood out to me.

My analytical approach is to evaluate the role of narrative recalibrations within face-to-face interaction to show the means by which such Taíno prophetic frames become shared and significant for Taíno social actors (see Meek, 2011 on recalibrations). This article suggests that among those Taíno social actors who acknowledged the Prophecy's narrative as couching their own Taíno trajectories, the Prophecy became the backdrop against which meaning was made and interpreted, through which the past was understood, and the course that could map future actions and events. Drawing from my own experiences as a Puerto Rican scholar who was read into the Prophecy of Aura Surey and my research on face-to-face interaction among the Taíno, I demonstrate the narratives of being Taíno that are at play in how Taíno respond to and frame the significance of events and how this affects Taíno community building and activism in Puerto Rico.² More broadly, this article argues for a consideration of prophetic narratives as sites for congealing identifications and belonging, historical understandings, interpretation, and future social action.

In the ethnographic instances I analyze, intersubjective relations are key sites for the communication of the prophetic narrative as well as for the modeling and socialization of how to appropriately analyze events within the prophetic frame. This is also a key site for the attainment of a socially recognizable Taíno identity. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) discuss how identity is intersubjectively achieved through interactional acts of alignment and differentiation. Drawing from this insight, I show how these acts might be further instantiated through socializing recalibrations that allow social actors to achieve alignment as well as locating them with respect to particular subject positions that can be mobilized in terms of directed social action (see Silverstein, 2005b). I highlight three instances of such recalibrations: personal trajectories, Taíno historical trajectories, and the socializing of appropriate Taíno prophetic interpretations during a particular event. These socializing recalibrations are reliant upon social actors' acquisition of competence as a Taíno speaker. In the socializing sequences I witnessed, some of the ideologies about communication and valued ways of speaking and interacting in particular Taíno groups became apparent. These ideologies and values encompassed ideas about the appropriate epistemologies for making sense of events, possible participants and frameworks for interaction, preferred forms of speaker sequencing, favored ways of talking, and appropriate codes to speak in. My analysis of Taíno interactions as framed by the *Prophecy of Aura Surey* considers these facets of Taíno communicative ideologies to show how new members recalibrate their own values and expectations to those of Taíno elders and leaders.

2.1. Temporalizing narratives, morality, and political action

Several scholars have discussed the role of prophecy as a temporally oriented social narrative (see Cruickshank, 1994 on Athapaskan speakers in the Yukon Territory; see Geertz, 1994 on Hopi prophecy). This discussion has largely centered on the role of prophecy among religious and indigenous groups, where such narrations serve as a font of authority that is able to connect several temporal frames, and in doing so link traditional pasts to contemporary occurrences. In the case of the Taíno, invoking the prophetic narrative allowed Taíno elders to establish their authority while socializing others on proper ways of meaning making by giving “storied form to proper relations” (Cruickshank, 1994, p. 161). In doing so, prophetic narratives offered Taíno social actors with a communally appropriate way to make sense of and react to events. Taíno renderings of the prophecy were particularly powerful because of the ability to retrospectively narrate and reframe the scarcity (or complete

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all names have been changed in order to protect the privacy of my research consultants and their organizations. Place-names however are real.

² Harding (1987) has discussed the ways in which witnessing as a form of face-to-face interaction plays a key role in the process of proselytizing and leading social actors to begin a process of Christian conversion. She argued that witnessing accomplished this by providing the person who is being witnessed to with a Christian language with which they could respond to daily events. This was reflected in her own experiences of being witnessed to, and then finding that the language of Baptist witnessing insinuated itself into her own responses to unexpected events.

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