The People vs. Columbus, et al.

By Bill Bigelow with contributions from members of the Taíno Community

This role play begins from the premise that a genocide was committed in the years after 1492, on the islands inhabited by the Taíno. Many Indigenous scholars estimate somewhere around 5 million Taíno inhabited the Greater Antilles pre contact.

Who — and/or what — was responsible for this genocide? This is the question students confront in this activity.

The intent of the lesson is to prompt students to examine the roots of colonial violence. When I first taught a version of this trial role play, it came at the conclusion of a longer unit about the meaning of the European arrival in the western hemisphere, one which included reading Taíno scholar José Barreiro’s “The Taíno: ‘Men of the Good,’” in Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years, which explicitly critiques the notion of the Taíno as “primitive.” As Barreiro writes, “The Taíno strove to feed all the people, and maintained a spirituality that respected most of their main animal and food sources, as well as the natural forces like climate, season, and weather. The Taíno lived respectfully in a bountiful place so their nature was bountiful.” Barreiro notes that “‘There was little or no quarreling observed among the Taíno by the Spaniards.”

Students and I also read excerpts from Columbus’s journal when he encountered the Taíno Nation, the Lukayan on the island of Guanahani (probably San Salvador/Watlings Island), included in Rethinking Columbus, which hints at the violence to come: “They do not bear arms or know them, for I showed them swords and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance” — a quote that students find chilling. On the third day of Columbus’s first encounter with the Taíno, October 14, 1492, Columbus bragged that “with 50 men they would be all kept in subjugation and forced to do whatever may be wished…”

The more students learn about the Taíno, Spain, Columbus’s voyages, and details of Columbus’s strategies to steal wealth and land from the people of the Caribbean — and Taíno resistance — the more effective this trial activity will be. But a caveat: The trial is not an introductory activity. A critical look at colonialism begins with the people being encountered prior to colonization, not with the state of siege that they experienced.

This lesson was originally written in 1991. Many things changed over my 30-year teaching career, but one thing stayed sadly consistent: Year after year, my high school U.S. history students had never heard of the Taíno people. Early in my classes, I asked students if they could name the person some people say “discovered America.” There was never any shortage of students calling out “Columbus!” Then I asked, “OK. Who did he supposedly ‘discover’? Who was here first?” Sometimes a few students would say, “Indians.” But I’d say, “No. I mean what was the specific name of the people he found?” In all my years of teaching, I never had a single student say: “The Taíno” — much less be able to name any individual Taíno. I told my students their name, and that there were possibly millions on the islands of the Caribbean. “What does it say,” I asked, “that we all know the name of the fellow from Europe, a white man, but none of us can name who the original peoples of the Caribbean are?”

Visit ZinnEdProject.org for the full lesson and updates.
The People vs. Columbus, et al. was — and is — part of a broader effort to bring Taíno peoples into the curriculum. Although this lesson is not designed to introduce students to Taíno culture, the enormity of what happened to the Taíno is at the heart of the lesson. Columbus's actions against the Taíno meet the United Nations' definition of genocide ("acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group") — as well as internationally recognized crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes. But there has been an almost complete curricular erasure of the Taíno peoples. Thus, it is up to us as educators to address these gaps, and consult and collaborate with those harmed to address misleading colonial narratives in our classes.

The updated version of this activity centers the Taíno people as the people harmed and includes indictments for four colonial offenders: Columbus, Columbus’s Men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the System of Empire.

In previous versions of this trial role play, the Taíno were included as one of the defendants. But in this one, they are accusers, not the accused. As accusers, the Taíno present charges in the role play of enslavement, rape, torture, maiming, killing, and occupation and theft of Taíno land. Of course, the Taíno took actions against these crimes by attacking and killing the invading forces in defense of territories, peoples, elders, and children. Taíno caciques established alliances throughout the Antilles to resist the heavily armed Spaniards — in Boriken (Puerto Rico), Quisqueya (Hispaniola), Cuba, and Xamayca (Jamaica).* Although this activity focuses on the crimes of the Spaniards, it’s important that our students learn that the Taíno

* Note that spellings vary. Here, we use those included in the UNESCO-published map based on the book edited by Jalil Sued-Badillo. See above.
resisted invasion and to this day the Taíno con-
tinue to resist the U.S. colonial occupation of
Boriken/Puerto Rico.

In response to the original role play, which
included an indictment of Taíno “defendants,”
members of the Taíno community, parents,
students, and educators reached out to the Zinn
Education Project. One Taíno scholar wrote
to say that in the original role play, the Taíno
were seen as victims; she was concerned that
the lesson erased Taíno resistance and although
intended as an indictment, nonetheless repeated
a false narrative that could be used as a template
for any bully, abuser, bigot, or racist, to co-opt in
order to justify their actions. This was certainly
the case if the Taíno role circulated out of con-
text. After meetings and discussions with Taino
elders and community members, we began to
work with the Taíno people to reimagine the
role play — by placing Taíno at the center of this
activity as the people harmed. This new version
is the product of that collaboration.

As indicated above, before beginning the role
play, make sure students are well-equipped with
information about the Taíno, pre- and post-
European contact. Along with José Barreiro’s
essay in Rethinking Columbus, see “Timeline:
Spain, Columbus, and Taínos” (p. 99), and at
the Zinn Education Project’s “If We Knew Our
History” site, my article, “Whose History Mat-
ters? Students Can Name Columbus, But Most
Have Never Heard of the Taíno People.” It is
also helpful if students have background knowl-
dge about the Doctrine of Discovery, which
provided supposed legitimacy for Columbus’s
conquest of Taíno lands. You might use with
students An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the
United States for Young People, by Roxanne Dun-
bar-Ortiz, adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie
Reese, which explains how under the Catholic
Church’s Doctrine of Discovery, “People whose
homelands were ‘discovered’ were considered
subjects of the Europeans and were expected to
do what the ‘discoverers’ wished. If they resisted,
they were to be conquered by European military
action.”

One further pedagogical thought. Recently,
there has been discussion — and controversy
— about role plays. It’s a term that embraces
strategies the Zinn Education Project supports,
and others we oppose. Some school activities —
“role plays” — demand that students “recreate
traumatic experiences,” in the words of Hasan
Kwame Jeffries, Ohio State University profes-
sor. No Zinn Education Project activity engages
in this kind of teaching. In this and other ZEP
role plays, we do not ask students to perform.
Although Columbus enslaved Taíno people, and
ordered his men to spread “terror,” students do
not act any of this out in this role play. Instead,
the role play asks students to attempt to rep-
resent different individuals’ and social groups’
points of view to determine who or what was
responsible for the crimes against the Taíno. The
“drama” in this activity is sparked by the intel-
lectual and ethical questions students confront,
not by reenacting historical events. [See “How
to — and How Not to — Teach Role Plays.”]

Materials Needed:

- Some construction paper suitable for mak-
ing name placards.
- Colored markers.
Suggested Procedure:

1. In preparation for class, list on the board: the Taíno Council; all the “offenders”: Columbus, Columbus’s men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the System of Empire.

2. Tell students that in this role play, the Taíno are bringing the offenders — Columbus, Columbus’s men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the System of Empire — to justice for the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, environmental crimes, and war crimes, including the destruction and theft of Taíno lands. [It may be helpful to offer students brief descriptions of genocide, crimes against humanity, environmental crimes, and war crimes. See box.]

3. Tell students that each offender is charged with the crimes listed above, in the years after 1492. In groups, students will portray the roles assigned to them, and as teacher, you will facilitate the proceedings. Explain that for the four accused groups, students’ responsibility will be twofold: 1. to accept and acknowledge or deny their responsibility for the actions they committed — however, they may not accept sole responsibility, and must name at least one other offender; 2. to explain which offenders they think are responsible and how. Explain that students in the Taíno Council role will work with you, the teacher, to present the crimes committed by each of the accused groups. The Taíno Council’s job will be to read over each of the crimes of the other groups and to come up with questions regarding these actions for each group. The Taíno are those harmed, so speak with the most authority about what happened to them.

At this point, students may show some confusion about the “System of Empire.” Tell them that it is your job as teacher to explain the crimes. Each group will receive a written copy of the alleged crimes; the Taíno Council (and each group, if they request these) will receive a copy of all crimes committed.

4. Explain the order of the activity:

- In each individual group, students will read and discuss the charges against them, and decide whether they acknowledge or deny responsibility for the crimes listed in their handout. Note that they can refute some charges and accept others, if that is what their group decides. It’s a good idea for students to write these up, as they will present them verbally and may want to read a statement. As in any activity, encourage stu-
dents to include each group member in their presentations.

- Taíno Council members have a different responsibility. Council members consider all the groups’ crimes to come up with pointed questions for each of the offenders. Material from any of the background readings may also help the Council members craft their questions.

- As teacher, you will begin by stating how a particular group is responsible for the crimes included on their handout. Before each group presents, the Taíno Council will have an opportunity to add to the crimes of that group.

- Once the teacher and Taíno Council state how each group is responsible, those groups will then acknowledge or deny responsibility. Again, they cannot accept sole responsibility; they must name at least one other group they believe is responsible and how. One option is to require — or to allow — each group to call at least one witness. For example, the King and Queen might call one of Columbus’s men and ask whether he ever saw them on the ship or saw them actually mistreat another person.

- Following each group’s presentation, the Taíno Council will question that group. When another group is mentioned in an offender’s presentation, that group may also raise questions or offer a rebuttal.

- This is repeated until all the groups have been through the process.

5. Once everyone has an overview of how the activity will proceed, ask students to count off into five groups of roughly equal numbers. To get things moving quickly, tell students that the first group gets first pick of who they’ll represent. Go around to each of the groups and distribute the appropriate handouts, and give all of the handouts to the Taíno Council, along with their own role description. Remind students to read the indictment against them carefully and discuss possible arguments in their defense. Encourage the accused groups to discuss and consider possible reasons for how they may or may not be responsible for the crimes presented.

As students discuss, the teacher goes from group to group, making sure students understand their roles and responsibilities. Also, at this point, distribute a placard and marker to each group so that they can display which role they are portraying.

Sometimes students want to see other groups’ indictments. Encourage them to read these because it may help them develop a fuller portrait of crimes committed against the Taíno. The Taíno Council should read every indictment. At this point, students may want more background on these events. As mentioned, there is more material in Rethinking Columbus and at the Zinn Education Project. Also, students might read the first chapter of Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States.

6. When each group appears ready — from a half hour to longer, depending on the class and how much preparation each group does — seat the class in a circle, with students from each group together. The teacher sits with the Taíno Council.

- I have found the best order in presenting the charges to the groups is Columbus first, followed by Columbus’s men, the King and Queen, and the System of Empire. It’s best to save the System for last as it’s the most difficult to explain, and depends on students having heard all the presentations. Again, the teacher presents the crimes to each group, the Taíno Council supplements this presentation of charges, and each group defends or acknowledges responsibility, and the Taíno Council questions, and other groups may then question. The process repeats itself until all groups
have been heard.

7. In the previous version of this role play, a jury deliberated to determine percentages of “guilt.” The advantage of this process is that it could provoke a conversation in class about who — or what — was most responsible for the crimes committed against the Taíno. The disadvantage is that this proportional distribution of guilt didn’t offer an opportunity to reflect on how the crimes against the Taíno might be addressed today, what “reparations” or “restitution” could look like in a process of restorative justice.

[One option is to pause at this point in the role play to explore alternatives to retributive justice. See, for example, *Healing the Wounds*, a short PBS episode on reconciliation after the Rwandan genocide. The documentary, *Tribal Justice*, by Anne Makepeace, explores how Abby Abinanti, Chief Judge of the Yurok Tribe on the North Coast of California, and Judge Claudette White, Chief Judge for the Quechan Tribal Court in Arizona, incorporate Indigenous models of restorative justice in their work.]

Ask students to step out of their roles and have them write a brief definition of “justice”: What is justice, what does it look like, what does it feel like?

Divide the class into groups of four or five.

Tell students: “Remember, the peoples at the center of this trial role play are the Taíno. Think about the crimes you heard described. Apply your definition of ‘justice’ to each of the groups in our role play: Columbus, Columbus’s men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the System of Empire, and the Taíno peoples. Think about the implications for today. What would justice for the Taíno people look like? What would be the best way to repair the harm done to the Taíno people? Do the Taíno need ‘restitution’? From whom? How could ‘balance and harmony’ be restored to the Taíno? How would the concept of justice apply to the System of Empire? Columbus, Columbus’s men, and the King and Queen are no longer living. What would it mean to apply your concept of ‘justice’ to these groups?”

In their groups, ask students to discuss these questions.

8. Seat the class in a circle and discuss these issues. Other questions to discuss:

- Was anyone entirely responsible for the crimes against the Taíno?
- Can you imagine a peaceful meeting between the Taíno and Europeans or did European life — the “System of Empire” — make dehumanization and violence inevitable?
- What more would you need to know about the System of Empire to understand how it encouraged and condoned colonial thinking and behavior resulting in the loss of humanity?
- If the System of Empire is held accountable, what are suggestions for restitution, reparations or recompense?
- What more would you need to know about life in the Greater Antilles today — the original home of Taíno peoples — to be able to think about what justice would look like for Taíno peoples today?
- In what ways do you see this history of the crimes of Columbus, Columbus’s men, the King and Queen, and the System of Empire being played out in the world today?
- How do we not repeat this history? What do we have to do today?

Note: The time needed for this activity can vary considerably depending on the preparation and defenses mounted by students. Teachers should allocate at least two 50-minute periods for the role play.
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Members of the Taino Community. This version of the lesson was revised in collaboration with Tanya Rodriguez (National Institute for Racial Equity) and the Grandmothers Council Bohio Atabei — Verona Iriarte and Naniki Reyes Ocasio. Additional feedback was provided by the United Confederation of Taino People.

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This updated lesson is offered for use in educational settings as part of the Zinn Education Project, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. The Grandmothers Council Bohio Atabei contributed to the revision, framing and writing of the activity with additional feedback provided by members of the Taino community and the United Confederation of Taino People. Contact the Zinn Education Project (zep@zinnedproject.org) for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

TEACHERS: We’d love your feedback after using this lesson. Submit your reflections, student comments, modifications, questions, and more. zinnedproject.org/share-your-story
The Taíno

The Charges:

The Taíno and Council of Taíno Elders bring the offenders — Columbus, Columbus’s Men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the System of Empire — to justice for the following crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes against Mother Earth.

When our behique — our ceremonial leader — first saw Columbus’s ships on the horizon, we welcomed them like we welcomed all the ships that came before. It wasn’t long before Columbus and the Spaniards began to abduct Taíno and hold us against our will while claiming our land for the King and Queen of Spain. Columbus’s sole intent was the theft of our lands and resources — material and human. When Spaniards’ swords wielded by Columbus and his men terrorized our babies, children, women, men, and elderly, Columbus condoned it and showed no concern.

When Columbus established a fort and called it La Navidad, he left and returned to Spain. Our cacique Caonabó, killed the 39 men Columbus left behind, after a horrific display of inhumanity. These men raped our young girls and boys, brutalized our babies by smashing them on rocks, used our bodies to test the sharpness of their swords, and cut off limbs or left them dangling by the skin with total disregard for our humanity.

Columbus and his men brutalized our people and also brutalized our land. The Spaniards destroyed our crops with the animals and other invasive species they introduced.

We, the Taíno on behalf of our Ancestors, our people, and future generations, bring Columbus, Columbus’s Men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the System of Empire to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes.

― from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
The Crimes:
The Taíno people bring you to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes against millions of Taíno people and Mother Earth.

Your first act in the lands you stumbled upon was to steal Indigenous people’s territory in the name of an empire thousands of miles away.

From the very beginning you abducted Taíno and enslaved them. Even when they attempted to escape, making it clear that they wanted to leave, you refused to release them.

Your journal shows your intent while in the Indies was to enslave, and to steal gold, resources, and land in the name of the Empire. You sometimes acted in a friendly manner to the Taíno on your first trip, but only so they would agree to show you the source of their gold.

On your second voyage to the Indies, you ordered your men to abduct and enslave over 500 Taíno people and had them shipped to Spain. You told your men to help themselves to the remaining Taíno captives, which they did. This act alone killed several hundred Taíno.

In 1495, you started the policy of forcing Taíno, age 14 and older, to collect gold for you. You punished those who didn’t return with the amount of gold demanded by cutting off their noses or hands. You publicly hung and burned Taíno alive and forced others to watch in horror.

You ordered your men to spread “terror” (as described by the Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas) among the Taíno when there were rumors of resistance. The list goes on. When you arrived in the Greater Antilles there may have been as many as a million or even 3 million Taíno on the islands. According to Bartolomé de las Casas, by 1542 there were 200 observable Taíno left. There is no one to blame but you.

You treated the land no better than you treated the people. The pigs you brought from Spain uprooted Taíno crops. Your ranches destroyed forests. You waged war on the Taíno people, but also on the environment.

You were Admiral, you were Viceroy, and you were Governor of the island.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
Columbus’ Men

The Crimes:
The Taíno people bring you to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes against millions of Taíno people and Mother Earth.

Without you, Columbus’s orders to steal Taíno lands, enslave, torture, maim, and kill them would have been empty words.

You are the ones responsible.

On Columbus’s very first voyage, you obeyed his order to kidnap “seven head of women, young ones and adults, and three small children.”

You were the henchmen. You raped women, girls, and boys. You killed. You tortured and maimed. You enslaved. You set dogs on infants. You cut the hands off Taíno who didn’t deliver enough gold and watched them bleed to death. You hung children and whipped Taíno if they didn’t work hard enough in the mines.

You may try to blame your superiors, Columbus or even King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. But because someone orders you to commit a crime does not free you of the responsibility of committing it. You could have said no. There were Spaniards, like the priests Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de las Casas, who eventually spoke out on behalf of the Taíno. Why didn’t you?

Without the soldier there is no war.
Without you there would have been no genocide.

Columbus wrote in his journal that the Taíno “are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest.” But you destroyed their lives.

Without you there would be no rape, plundering, or stealing of Taíno lands.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella

The Crimes:
The Taíno people bring you to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes against millions of Taíno people and Mother Earth.

Without your money, Columbus couldn’t have launched his plan to find “India” by sailing west. Without you, he was an unemployed sailor. You hired him to colonize, enslave, and steal new lands — to make you even more wealthy.

When Columbus returned after his first voyage with several Taíno captives, and you rewarded him, you became responsible for international human trafficking. You could have ordered Columbus to stop abducting Taíno. You could have punished him for this immoral act. By not doing anything to stop Columbus and his men, you legalized and condoned every crime they committed.

In his first letter to you, Columbus wrote that the Taíno would make excellent “servants.” He bragged: “With 50 men we could subjugate [control] them all and make them do whatever we want.” Right away, you could have ordered him to enslave no one. But you did not, and thus you were complicit in all the enslavement that came after. True, after a while you discouraged Columbus from enslaving people — but you did nothing to punish or hold him accountable for these crimes. Really, you didn’t care what Columbus did, you used the System of Empire and the Papal Bulls from the Catholic Church to justify and absolve the perpetrators of the genocide, torture, maiming, enslavement, and stealing of Taíno lands. You took no action. Had you wanted to stop these crimes against the Taíno, you would have ordered all your subjects home. But then, your objective to expand your empire wouldn’t have been met.

You allowed Columbus to bring horses, pigs, and cattle to the land of the Taíno. These invasive species “dominated and destroyed” Taíno crops and animals, as one writer described it.

Columbus was unpopular with other Spaniards, so you replaced him as governor. Because you never punished him for the crimes committed against the Taíno, these crimes continued under later governors who were never held accountable.

You are just as responsible as the ones wielding the swords and hangman’s nooses.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
The System of Empire

Crimes:
The Taíno people bring you to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and environmental crimes against millions of Taíno people and Mother Earth.

This gets complicated. You are not a person, but a system. In this case, the real criminal is not human.

True, Columbus and his men did the killing. Columbus gave the orders and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella paid the bills and took the profits. But why did they behave the way they did? Were they born evil and greedy? The real responsibility lies with a system that values property over people.

European society was set up so that an individual had to own property to feel secure. The more property one owned, the more security, the more control over one’s destiny. There was no security without private ownership of property. If you were poor, you could starve. By contrast, the Taíno had no “poor” and no one starved. The Taíno shared the land and resources and respected Mother Earth. They saw — and still see — all living beings as interconnected.

The Europeans’ love of gold was like a disease. In fact, this attitude was a product of a diseased system. To get more wealth, Columbus and his men terrorized the Taíno into searching out gold and forced them to work on their farms and in their mines. They justified all this by telling themselves that the Taíno weren’t Christian, so “we” can control “their” land and labor. The European system of empire saw only white Christians as full human beings.

It was life in a rotten system that valued private property (especially gold) and approved of violence against foreigners and non-Christians to get it, that made Columbus and his men enslave and kill. Sane people do not kill hundreds of thousands of other human beings. It was an insane system that led Columbus and the others to behave the way they did. You, as the representatives of this system, are responsible for the genocide, torture, and maiming committed against Taíno and the theft of their lands.

As a final test to see who is guilty for the attempted genocide of the Taíno, ask yourself these questions:

- If it had been some other “explorer” besides Columbus to “discover America,” would he have let the Taíno keep their land?
- Would he not have enslaved people?
- Would he not have made them search for gold and work in the mines?

You know the answer: Any European conqueror would have been every bit as barbaric as Columbus, because they all came from the same system.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
This lesson is based on a lesson first published in the *Rethinking Schools* book, *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*.

The book includes more than 80 essays, poems, interviews, historical vignettes, and lesson plans that reevaluate the myth of Columbus and issues of Indigenous rights. *Rethinking Columbus* is packed with useful teaching ideas for kindergarten through college.

Go to [http://bit.ly/ZEPReThinkColumbus](http://bit.ly/ZEPReThinkColumbus) to see the table of contents and to read the book’s introduction.

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**Howard Zinn (1922-2010)**  
Author of *A People’s History of the United States*

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