

1493-1993: Reflections

Upon The "Quincentennial"

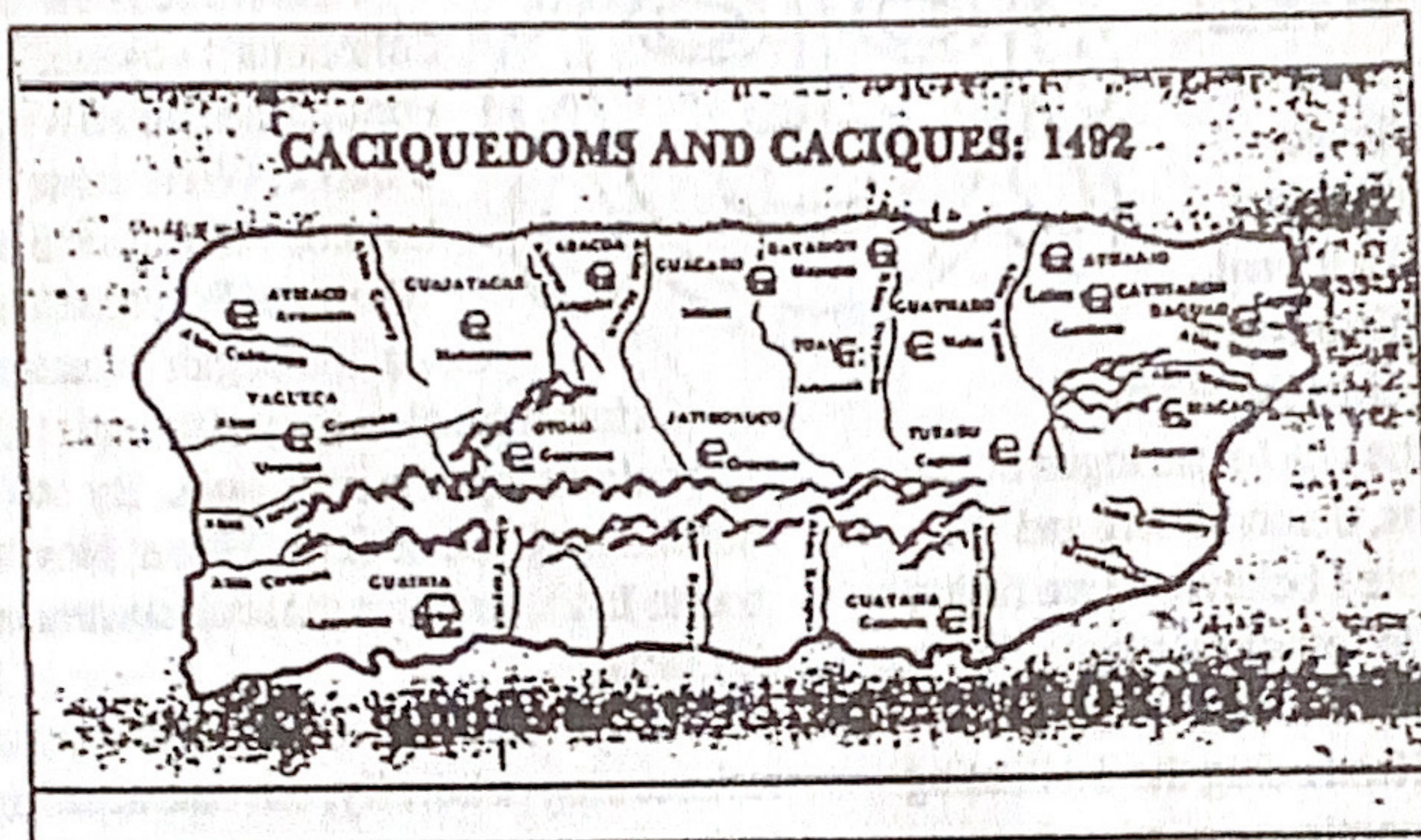
by Dr. Jalil Sued Badillo*

Compañeros, this morning I do not wish to do anything other than point to some of the many events and considerations hidden behind the ill-named celebration of the 500th Anniversary, and the position that we should take as Puerto Ricans. We all know that which is supposed to be celebrated, but what is hidden and obscured has not been so obvious.

George Orwell said that those who control the past control the future, and those who control the present control the past. And the past is controlled by obscuring and manipulating historical information, warping information, and lessening its impact on the consciousness. The history of historical manipulation has deep roots in Puerto Rico. We are a people who have traditionally lived unable to face our past, just as we are also a people who have lived outside our own immediate geography. Since the period of Carlos V, when the instruction of the history of the Americas was prohibited, Puerto Rico has lacked an historical study oriented from our present position. It means that during these 500 years, a systematic attempt has been made to erase the Creole's memory, and by preventing the accumulation of experiences his guides to effective action are removed. Compared to the development of Caribbean historiography in general, the borinqueño has had, until relatively recent times, a very poor tradition. In this process of erasing the collective memory, the colonial violence has been—under Spain just as under the United States—very effective. From there amidst the Latin American and Caribbean liberation commotion of the past century, Puerto Rico has boasted the role of the most loyal colony of the Empire. From here, what contemporary national protests have eradicated in the four corners of the planet,

Puerto Rico has turned around begging for its complete dissolution as a people through the perpetual annexation to another people, the North American. Whichever are said to be political preferences have resulted from comfortable

colonial situations, or in defense of privileges or rights. But history contradicts such possibilities. The quality of life under Spain could not have reached more contemptible levels, and the quality of life today, for the majority of our co-citizens, as many on the continent as on the island could not be more warped. The statis-



Cacicquedoms on Boriquén.

tics abound.

The first history of Puerto Rico was written in poor Spanish very late in the 18th century by Father Ilfigo Abad y la Sierra, and resulted in a racist mass of dates selected by imperial chroniclers of the previous centuries. In his text, he blames the laziness of the Puerto Ricans for the economic stagnation in which Spain had submerged its Caribbean colonies. To the hot climate and the mix of races he attributes that which he calls the incapacity for betterment of the Creole. The mediocrity of his work is made evident before those of his contemporaries like the abbé Raynal (1770) and Brian Edwards (1793).

During the 19th century, this poor historiography persists, notwithstanding that the island's population multiplied and partially arose from its economic stagnation by plunging into the new sugar production circuits for the international markets. Remember the valiant acts of a son of the country, José Julián Acosta, a teacher who in an alleged subversive effort, attempted revising Ilfigo Abad's work with abundant clarifying notes, which led to his expulsion from teaching. Acosta's notes never saw light in the new edition. That the 19th century is described by many as the formation of the Puerto Rican nation serves as witness to the clumsiest maneuvering to prevent the assumption of the national consciousness during the