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American Studies

Caliban resources for Ronald Takaki's A Different Mirror (1993)

from William Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611)

Trinculo: [Noticing Caliban.] What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish—a very ancient and fishlike smell, and kind of not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish. Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man\*. Any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. Legged like a man, and his fins like arms! Warm, o' my troth! I do now let loose my opinion, hold it no longer: this is no fish, but an islander that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt. (2.2)

\* i.e., make its owner a gentleman

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from Barbara A. Mowat  
Folger Shakespeare Library

--The allusion here . . . seems to be to England's fascination with Native Americans - "Indians" - brought from the New World in the sixteenth century and put on exhibition. (Mowat and Werstine 174)

--The Tempest's "story" stretches over more than twenty-four years and several sea journeys; it embeds elements of the mythological voyages of Aeneas and of Jason and the Argonauts, of the biblical voyages of St. Paul, and of actual contemporary voyages in the new world of Virginia. (Mowat 186)

--Prospero's subjugation of Caliban has a particularly New World flavor. The play itself, no matter how steeped it is in ancient voyage literature and no matter how much emphasis it places on its Mediterranean setting, is also a representation of New World exploration. (Mowat 192)

--Shakespeare's decision to include a "wild man" among his island's cast of characters, and (as Stephen Greenblatt notes) to place him in opposition to a European prince whose power lies in his language and his books, raises a host of questions for us about the play. The Tempest was written just as England was beginning what would become massive empire-building through the subjugating of others and the possessing of their lands. (Mowat 194-5)

--Caliban may be seen as representing two quite different images. Shakespeare gives him negative traits attached to New World natives (traits that seem to many today to smack of racist responses to the strange and to the Other) while giving him at the same time a richly poetic language and a sensitive awareness of nature and the supernatural. (ibid.)

--As many readers and audiences today look back at the centuries of colonization of the Americas, Africa, and India from, as it were, Caliban's perspective, The Tempest, once considered Shakespeare's most serene, most lyrical play, is now put forward as his representation, for good or ill, of the colonization and the colonized. (ibid.)

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Works cited

Mowat, Barbara A. The Tempest: A Modern Perspective. The Tempest. By William Shakespeare. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Washington Square: New York, 1994. 185-99.

Mowat, Barbara A., and Paul Werstine, ed. The Tempest. By William Shakespeare. Washington Square: New York, 1994.