A monstrous crime was committed in the years after 1492, when as many as three million Tainos on the island of Hispaniola lost their lives.

Who — or what — was responsible for this slaughter?

This is what we will confront here today....

— from the role-play trial, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
FOR THE SAKE OF GOLD

To fill the empty ships going back to Castile, to stop his detractors from talking, to prove his success, Columbus needed gold. And the following system was adopted for this end.

Every man and woman, every boy or girl of fourteen or older, in the province of Cibao (of the imaginary gold fields) had to collect gold for the Spaniards. As their measure, the Spaniards used those same miserable hawks’ bells, the little trinkets they had given away so freely when they first came “as if from Heaven.” Every three months, every Indian had to bring to one of the forts a hawk’s bell filled with gold dust. The chiefs had to bring in about ten times that amount. In the other provinces of Hispaniola, twenty-five pounds of spun cotton took the place of gold.

Copper tokens were manufactured, and when an Indian had brought his or her tribute to an armed post, he or she received such a token, stamped with the month, to be hung around the neck. With that they were safe for another three months while collecting more gold.

Whoever was caught without a token was killed by having his or her hands cut off.

There were no gold fields, and thus, once the Indians had handed in whatever they still had in gold ornaments, their only hope was to work all day in the streams, washing out gold dust from the pebbles. It was an impossible task, but those Indians who tried to flee into the mountains were systematically hunted down with dogs and killed, to set an example for the others to keep trying.

This role play begins with the premise that a monstrous crime was committed in the years after 1492, when perhaps as many as three million or more Taínos on the island of Hispaniola lost their lives. (Most scholars estimate the number of people on Hispaniola in 1492 at between one and three million; some estimates are lower and some much higher. By 1550, very few Taínos remained alive.) Who — and/or what — was responsible for this slaughter? This is the question students confront here.

Materials Needed:

1. Some construction paper suitable for making name placards.
2. Colored markers.

Suggested Procedure:

1. In preparation for class, list the names of all the “defendants” on the board: Columbus, Columbus’s men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Taínos, and the System of Empire.

2. Tell students that each of these defendants is charged with murder — the murder of the Taíno Indians in the years following 1492. Tell them that, in groups, students will portray the defendants and that you, the teacher, will be the prosecutor. Explain that students’ responsibility will be twofold: a) to defend themselves against the charges, and b) to explain who they think is guilty and why.

   One rule: They may plead guilty if they wish, but they cannot claim sole responsibility; they must accuse at least one other defendant. At this point, students sometimes protest that it’s ridiculous to charge the Taínos for their own deaths, or they may show some confusion about the “system of empire.” Tell them not to worry, that it’s your job as prosecutor to explain the charges. Each group will receive a written copy of the charges against them.

3. Explain the order of the activity:

   a. In their groups, they will prepare a defense against the charges contained in the indictments. It’s a good idea for students to write these up, as they will be presenting these orally and may want to read a statement.

   b. Before the trial begins, you will choose several students, who will be sworn to neutrality. These people will be the jury.

   c. As prosecutor, you will begin by arguing the guilt of a particular group.

   d. Those in the group accused by the prosecutor will then defend themselves and will state who they believe is guilty and why. [One option is to require that each group call at least one witness. For example, in one class, the group representing the King and Queen called one of the Taínos to the stand and asked, “Have you ever seen me before?” No. “Did I ever kill any of your people?” No. “Did I ever hurt any of your people?” No. “We have no further questions.”]

   e. The jury will then question that group, and others may also question the group and offer rebuttals.

   f. This process is repeated until all the groups have been accused and have defended themselves. The jury will then decide guilt and innocence.

4. Ask students to count off into five groups of roughly equal numbers. To get things moving quickly, I like to tell students that the first group to circle up gets first pick of who they’ll represent. Go around to each of the groups and distribute the appropriate “indictment” sheets. Remind students to read the indictment against them carefully and discuss possible arguments in their defense.
As they discuss, I wander from group to group, making sure students understand their responsibilities — at times playing devil’s advocate, at times helping them consider possible defenses. Also, at this point, I distribute a placard and marker to each group so that they can display which role they are portraying.

Sometimes students want to see the indictments against the other groups. I encourage them to read these because it will help students develop additional arguments. Also, students may want to use other “evidence” included throughout *Rethinking Columbus* — for example, from Columbus’s diary (p. 96), the timeline (p. 99), or the Taínos (p. 106).

5. When each group appears ready — after perhaps a half hour, depending on the class — choose a jury: one member from each group (in a big class), or a total of three students in a smaller class. Publicly swear them to neutrality; they no longer represent the King and Queen, the Taínos, or anyone else.

6. The order of prosecution is up to you. I prefer: Columbus’s men, Columbus, the King and Queen, the Taínos, and the System of Empire. I save the System for last as it’s the most difficult to prosecute, and depends on having heard the other groups’ presentations. As mentioned, the teacher argues the indictment for each group, the group defends, the jury questions, and other groups may then question. Then, the process repeats itself for each indictment. The written indictments should be an adequate outline for prosecution, but I always feel free to embellish.

7. After each group has been charged and has made its defense, I ask the jury to step out of the classroom and deliberate. They can assign “percentage guilt,” e.g., one party is 25% guilty, another 60%, etc. They also need to offer clear explanations for why they decided as they did. As they deliberate, I ask the rest of the class to step out of their roles and to do in writing the same thing the jury is doing.

8. The jury returns and explains its verdict and then we discuss. Here are some questions and issues to raise:

- Was anyone entirely not guilty? Did the prosecutor convince you that the Taínos were in part responsible for their own deaths?
- Why didn’t the Taínos kill Columbus on his first voyage?
- How did you weigh responsibility between the “bosses” and the men they hired?
- Can you imagine a peaceful meeting between Europeans and Taínos? Or did European life — the “System of Empire” — make violence inevitable? How would Spain and other European countries have had to be different to have made a more peaceful outcome possible?

- What more would you need to know about the System of Empire to understand how it affected people’s thinking and behavior?
- If the System of Empire is guilty, what should be the “sentence”? You can’t put a system in prison.

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.
The Indictment:
You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

Your first act in the lands you “discovered” was to take possession of another people’s territory in the name of an empire thousands of miles away.

From the very beginning of your time in the Indies you kidnapped Indians. Even when they attempted to escape, making it clear that they wished to leave, you refused to release them.

Your journal shows that your only wish in the Indies was to find gold. The only reason you showed any kindness to the Taínos on your first trip was so they would agree to show you the source of their gold.

On your second voyage to the Indies, you ordered your men to round up Indians and had over 500 shipped to Spain as slaves. You told your men to help themselves to the remaining Taíno captives, which they did. This act alone killed several hundred Taínos.

In 1495 you started the policy of forcing Indians, age 14 and older, to collect gold for you. Those who didn’t return every three months with the amount of gold you demanded were punished by having their hands chopped off.

You ordered your men to spread “terror” among the Taínos when there was rumor of resistance.

The list goes on. When you arrived on Hispaniola there may have been as many as a million or even three million Taínos on the island. According to one Spanish priest, by 1542 there were 200 Taínos left. There is no one to blame but you.

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

—from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
The Indictment:
You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

Without you, Columbus’s orders to enslave and kill Taínos would have been empty words.

There is no evidence that Columbus personally captured slaves or killed anyone with his own hands. You are the ones responsible for the enslavement of first hundreds, then thousands, of Taíno Indians.

You did the dirty work. You raped women. You set dogs on infants. You cut the hands off Taínos who didn’t deliver enough gold. You whipped Taínos if they didn’t work hard enough in the mines.

Without you there were no crimes.

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 blame for committing it. You could have said no. There were Spaniards, like the priests Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de las Casas, who refused to mistreat Indians and spoke out on their behalf. Why didn’t you?

Without the soldier there is no war.

Without you there would have been no genocide.

— from the role play The People vs. Columbus, et al.
Without your money, Columbus couldn’t have launched his plan to find the East Indies by sailing west. Without you, he was an unemployed sailor.

You hired him to “discover” and claim new lands. Thus you are guilty of conspiracy to steal the territory of people you didn’t even know, who had never bothered or harmed you.

When Columbus returned after his first voyage with several Indian captives, and you rewarded him, you became guilty of kidnapping. You could have ordered Columbus to stop kidnapping Indians. You could have punished him for this illegal act. By not doing anything to stop Columbus and his men, you legalized every crime they committed.

In his first letter to you, Columbus wrote that the Indians would make excellent slaves. Right away, you could have ordered him to take no slaves. You did no such thing, and thus became accomplices in all future slave taking. True, after a while you discouraged Columbus from taking slaves — they mostly died, anyway — but you never punished him for these crimes which killed hundreds of human beings.

Really, you didn’t care what Columbus did, so long as you got rich. At times, you would order that the Indians should be treated humanely. But you took no action to stop the Indians from being forced to work in the mines. They were slaves in everything but name. Had you wanted the cruelty to stop, you could have ordered all your subjects home. But then you wouldn’t have gotten any more gold. And that was what you wanted, right?

Because Columbus was unpopular with other Spaniards, you replaced him as governor. But you never punished him for the crimes committed against Taínos when he was governor. And these crimes continued under the next governor.

Because you were the bosses and because you paid the bills, you have more guilt than had you been the ones wielding the swords and hangmen’s nooses.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
The Indictment:
You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

While you are the victim of this crime, you are also guilty of committing it. You failed to fight back against the Spaniards. This meant that you brought the fate of slavery and death upon yourselves.

From the very beginning you must have known what Columbus meant to do. He took Indian captives from other islands and held them against their will. He claimed your land as his own. He was interested only in finding gold. When your people were cut by Spaniards’ swords, he and his men showed no concern. All this you must have known.

Tragically, you let this greedy, violent man get away, so he could return. On his next trip, however, he brought 17 ships and between 1,200 and 1,500 men, all heavily armed. You allowed, even invited, this invasion.

Foolishly, your cacique (leader), Caonabó, killed the 39 men Columbus left behind. Why didn’t Caonabó and the Taínos kill all the Spaniards — including Columbus — before they had a chance to return to Spain? Imagine the different outcome had the Taínos been smart enough to stop Columbus before he could launch the invasion.

Who knows why the Taínos of Hispaniola did not unite to throw out all the Spaniards? Had Taínos worked together they might have beaten the Spaniards even after Columbus returned. After all, the Spaniards numbered fewer than 2,000; Taínos numbered in the hundreds of thousands, possibly as many as three million.

However, as a result of this Taíno failure, all the Native peoples of the Americas suffered.

—from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
This gets complicated. You are not a person, but a system. We like to blame crimes on people. But in this case, the real criminal is not human.

True, Columbus’s men did the killing, Columbus gave the orders and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella paid the bills — and took the profits. But what made them behave the way they did? Were they born evil and greedy? The real blame lies with a system that values property over people.

European society was organized 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. The Taínos were not perfect, but they had no “poor” and no one starved. Indians commented that Europeans’ love of gold was like a disease. In fact, this attitude was a product of a diseased system.

In order to get more wealth, Columbus and his men took Indians as slaves, terrorized them 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 Indians weren’t Christian, so “we” can control “their” land and labor. The European system saw only white Christians as full human beings.

It was life in a 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 a rotten, insane system that led Columbus and the others to behave the way they did. You, as the representatives of this system, are guilty for the genocide committed against Taínos.

As a final test to see who is guilty for the mass murder of the Taínos, ask yourself these questions:

• If it had been some other “explorer” besides Columbus to “discover America,” would he have let the Taínos keep their land?
• Would he not have taken slaves?
• 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 bad as Columbus. Why? Because the system of empire was to blame, not any particular individual.

— from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.
I've had great success with the Columbus role play in my 5th-grade classroom, adapting it in the following manner:

**Background Preparation**
1. I do it as the culmination of our Columbus / Native American / colonialism unit so that the children have sufficient background knowledge. I explain the main components of the trial and show portions of a videotape from a previous year to give students a sense of what it will be like. (Depending on the sophistication of the particular class, I sometimes omit “The System of Empire” group, or I simplify it to become “Bad Ideas” — how the love of gold and property, and a disrespect for native peoples, were responsible for the crimes against the Taínos.
2. We talk about the concept of evidence and I provide “evidence sheets” — each one numbered — for the kids to keep in their folders for future reference. Examples of such evidence sheets are a modified version of the Timeline on p. 99; examples of Taíno resistance, p. 111; Columbus’s journal p. 96; the writings of las Casas, p. 103; background on the Taínos, p. 106. As a whole class, we read each evidence sheet and brainstorm how it might be used by the different groups.
3. We study important “courtroom” vocabulary such as witness, evidence, jury, etc.
4. I model and students practice statements such as, “I will present evidence to show...” or “How do you explain your statement... given...?”
5. I model how to take notes when someone is speaking and then develop arguments and counter-arguments to their statements.
6. After the above preparation, I have students choose in order of priority what group they’d like to be in. (Later I carefully divide the group so that there is a good mix in each group of strong readers and self-confident speakers).

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**Preparing Defense Statements**
1. I post the list of students and groups early in the day. When the students break down to prepare their statements, witnesses, etc., they have explicit instructions to first read the “indictment” sheet, then brainstorm ideas, and finally write their own statements.
2. I provide each group with a special brainstorming sheet, and each student with a special sheet for them to write their own statement. The sheet provides a structure for the students — “Hello, my name is...” [the students think up an appropriate fictitious name]; I am... [students describe their fictitious self and family]; I think... [students write out their argument that they will present].
3. I suggest that each group decide who will be a lawyer and a witness.
4. I have students finish their speeches for homework.
5. The groups meet the following day to practice their speeches and the part that the lawyers and witness will play. Oftentimes I model the way a lawyer and witness might interact.

**The Trial**
1. I have a couple of students videotape the role play. This lends an air of importance to the trial.
2. I play the role of the prosecutor. I generally try to have another adult — a student teacher, parent, or volunteer — play the role of the judge. Between the two of us, we can usually keep order. I have the judge explain the idea of shared guilt, and use a percentage pie-chart to give examples of what a jury might decide in terms of responsibility.
3. When the jury is deliberating, I have each student fill out a role-play reflection sheet, in which they reflect on what they learned preparing for and participating in the role play. In the reflection sheet, they also write down who they think is guilty.