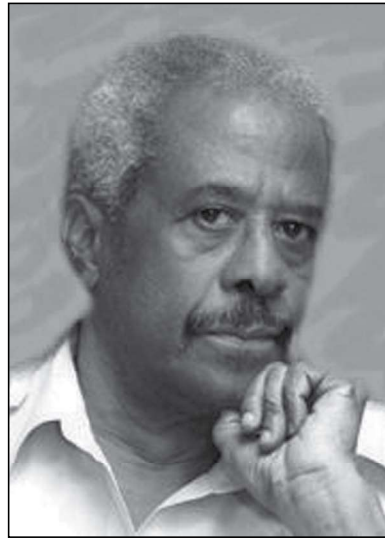


THE CARIBBEANIST MERVYN C. ALLEYNE (1933-2016)*

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Spanning a period of more than fifty years, Mervyn Coleridge Alleyne's vibrant career as a Caribbeanist produced valuable scholarship that enriched traditional disciplines while it also helped to define emergent fields of study, most significantly Caribbean linguistics. Much of his work in the latter area offers a holistic view of language, presenting insights that transcend the various subfields of linguistics. At the same time, the body of work that he leaves behind is of impressive interdisciplinary breadth. His publications—eight books and more than 100 chapters, articles, and reviews—include significant contributions in the areas of history, culture, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and folk medicine. He also had an impact on the more personal level, as his kindness, humility, good energy, and balanced spirit touched the hearts, minds, and daily lives of many: students, faculty, staff, friends, family, and colleagues, as well as readers near and far.



Mervyn Coleridge Alleyne

Alleyne was born on 13 June 1933 in Port of Spain, Trinidad, the fourth of five children. His parents were Coleridge Fitzgerald Alleyne, a builder and contractor, and Carmen Valeria Alleyne, an elementary school teacher. As a young boy, Alleyne studied in Port of Spain's Queen's Royal College. He grew up in the coastal town of St. James, a place famous for the Muslim festival of Hosay. Living close to the many elderly Indo-Trinidadians there apparently sparked an early interest in linguistic diversity and verbal play; as he recalled years later, this allowed him to learn to curse in Bhojpuri at a young age.

After completing secondary school, he was awarded a scholarship to the fledgling University College of the West Indies. This opportunity led him to complete his B.A. in Spanish and French in Jamaica and also expanded his experience in the Caribbean. As an undergraduate, Alleyne fell in love with Haiti and spent each summer in Port-au-Prince, where the spirit of progressive change that invigorated much of the capital captivated him. He was impressed—and personally inspired by—the reality that Haitian rather than French was the language of the country. As he later recalled:

[Haitian] belonged to the people, they spoke in it, they wrote in it, and they were proud of it. This was ‘the heyday of the postcolonial period’ and I joined them in rejecting anything that smacked of the imperial order, in favor of a Caribbean perspective.¹ (114)

Later Alleyne completed graduate work in linguistic dialectology in France, where he worked in Lyon at a leading institute in his field. He completed a doctoral project focusing on wind names in Gallo-Romance languages. For this project he documented over 100 different names for winds in various varieties of French, working with linguistic geographers, collecting original data, and developing linguistic dialect maps. Alleyne recalled that some of the people that provided him with terms describing the wind were elders who had been born in the nineteenth century. His research revealed that they had learned how to understand and talk about the wind from their parents and grandparents. The University of Strasbourg awarded his Ph.D.

In 1959, the year of the Cuban Revolution, Alleyne returned to Jamaica and began working at the University of the West Indies at Mona. He was hired as a lecturer to teach in two areas, Romance philology and French medieval literature. Soon, however, his understanding of his professional ambitions and the needs of Jamaican society began to change. Political leaders, professors, and students became increasingly vocal about the importance of Caribbean integration. Increasingly aware of the possibilities that could be realized through teaching about and doing research on the society in which they lived, he saw higher education as a strategic resource for positive social, economic, and political transformation. With this in mind, he chose to shift his attention away from his anticipated areas of academic inquiry.

The University of Puerto Rico assisted Alleyne with his transition to scholarship focusing on the Caribbean by awarding him a summer scholarship to do fieldwork in St. Lucia. The journal *Caribbean Studies* published the resulting article in its first issue.² This and other examples of his early work on the Caribbean coincided with anticolonial campaigns associated with the Jamaica’s independence in 1962.

His professional milestones in the years that followed include participation in the 1968 International Conference on Creole Languages, one of the earliest professional meetings of researchers in Caribbean language studies. There he presented his influential paper “Acculturation and the Cultural Matrix of Creolization,” which would become one of the most frequently cited articles in the field.³ He also held several prestigious visiting associate professorships. Among these were teaching and research stints at Yale University, Indiana University, the State University of New York, and the University of Amsterdam.

His seminal *Comparative Afro-American: An Historical-Comparative Study of English-Based Afro-American Dialects of the New World* (1980) uses principles of general linguistics and comparative dialectology to analyze the structures and histories of the Caribbean languages that emerged in the region as the result of European colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade. Written during a period in which most researchers saw the languages of the African diaspora in the Americas as exceptional or different—as inferior “dialects”—it rejects the hypothesis that creoles emerged from pidgins. However, rather than dwell on these unfortunate misconceptions, it does something about them, documenting and discussing the significance of the West African substratum.

In fact, when he began *Comparative Afro-American*, his mind wasn’t on politics or even society, instead he was “doing science,” but once the project was done, its significance had evolved, due mainly to shifts in discourse about the people of African descent and their ways of life. As he explains in the book’s introduction:

I wanted to boost the morale of Black people. We were marginalized. People were saying that we had no culture. Some believed that our languages amounted to nothing more than ‘bad English.’ I wanted to show that the languages were a part of our culture (historically and currently) and that they had a legitimate base from which they developed. [...] the African base. The book became not only a scientific exercise in the historical-comparative method, but also a text that was ideological and political.⁴ (6)

The tendency for his forward-looking vision to have a socio-political component is also clear in his introduction to *Theoretical Orientations in Creole Studies*.⁵ Here he implores readers to wake up, to recognize and overcome preconceptions and biases, and to support others in doing the same. Its closing sentence expresses his wish that discussion and progress should extend “as far as our unshackled minds would lead us” (p. 17). In today’s political environment he would certainly want us to pursue this goal, not only by boosting morale but also by collaborating to complete the pressing work that needs to be done in linguistics and in the humanities and social sciences more generally.

Throughout his professional career, Alleyne argued that the meaning of *Creole* was unclear and not fixed and insisted its implications are illogical. He also rejected derivations such as *creolization* and *creoleness*. Significant for those who wish to honor this element of his legacy, when referring to specific languages he opted for demonyms or gentilics (e.g., Anguillian, Haitian, Jamaican), envisioning these as central to a system of categorization and naming that was more accurate and elegant.

In fact, in 1982, when Alleyne received the designation Professor, the highest ranking for faculty members at the University of the West Indies, he was requested to make recommendations concerning the precise wording of his new title. Most assumed that he would suggest *Professor of Creole Linguistics*, but he requested that it be *Professor of Sociolinguistics*. While he was extremely interested in Caribbean languages, Alleyne asserted that to use *Creole* in his title would be irresponsible and only exacerbate the contradictions surrounding the term. On this and many other occasions, he held that the term shouldn't be used in academic contexts due to the stigma attached to it, the uncertainty of its meaning, and questions about how to use it scientifically.

His influential *Roots of Jamaican Culture*, a cultural history of the Jamaican people that masterfully blends description and analysis, developed his argument that Afro-American culture is an extension of African culture. In this work he also reflected on his personal development and encouraged readers to rethink the notion that rigorous scholarship should be detached and or express indifference. In his words:

I have been, at different times, a Marxist and a Black nationalist; I have come close to Rastafarianism, and I have tried to reconcile all three of these positions. I have never stood aloof from the struggles of Black peoples against racism and oppression and I believe that the struggles must continue on several fronts. Imperialism in the twentieth century has been and continues to be inextricably bound up with racism, so that the struggle against oppression has not only a 'class' but also a 'race' aspect.⁶ (ix)

Alleyne was appointed a Rockefeller Fellow at the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras Campus for the academic year 1996-97 in conjunction with the project Caribe 2000. At that time he was active in campus life and completed research for his book *The Construction and Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World* (2002). In this same period he enjoyed a visiting appointment at the Martinique campus of the *Université des Antilles et de la Guyane*. In these and the other settings in which he worked, he inspired students to pursue careers in linguistics and many junior faculty members appreciated him as a de facto mentor.

In 2003 Alleyne accepted a position as Professor of English in the

College of Humanities at the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras Campus (UPR-RP) and began to serve the university in numerous capacities. He offered numerous undergraduate courses in linguistics. In addition, he taught in the doctoral program in Caribbean languages and literatures, which had only recently begun, frequently serving on dissertation committees and offering the core course Language and Literature of the English-Speaking Caribbean.

Several of the publications he completed at the UPR-RP reflect his interest in the local context. Several of these weave together the analysis of specific aspects of Puerto Rican society with information about related phenomena in other Caribbean settings. This work discusses topics such as language, race, identity, and music.

Various organizations and institutions acknowledged his accomplishments. In the late 1990s, both the Society of Caribbean Linguistics and the Linguistics Society of America distinguished him as an honorary member, recognizing his tireless commitment to research that elevated scientific understanding as well as the social status of Caribbean languages. Pauline Christie's edited volume *Caribbean Language Issues, Old and New* (1996) was published in celebration of Alleyne's sixtieth birthday and his achievements in linguistics. An additional honor, upon retirement from the University of the West Indies, he was given the title of Professor Emeritus. In 2011, the UPR-RP's Institute of Caribbean Studies at UPR honored him with the activity "The Interdisciplinary Scholarship of A Caribbeanist: A Tribute to Dr. Mervyn Alleyne."⁷

During this latter part of his career, he called for academic work that is engaged and responsive to urgent needs, arguing, for example, that a more equitable language policy should include the publication of literature of all types, as well as pedagogical grammars in Jamaican and other Caribbean languages. He questioned the value of faddish approaches to theory and analysis and expressed concern that decades into the study of Caribbean languages the proper foundational research, including pedagogical and descriptive grammars, has not been done.

Structured across multiple centers of gravity—among them, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico—his legacy as an educator remains relevant to the lives of the Caribbean's inhabitants and to people in other parts of the world. It underscores the contributions that academic dialogue and scholarly production can make to contemporary society. Shortly after his passing Lise Winer shared an online message with the Society of Caribbean linguistics in which she observed that Alleyne "wrestled the perspective of study from the Old World firmly to reside in the Caribbean itself." She continued:

This perspective encouraged the collection of data and the building of theory from inside a particular historical context, breaking down

previously constructed scholarly barriers and leading to a greater reliance on the pan-Caribbean reality. In addition, Mervyn based all observation and analysis within the cultural context in which the historical processes of language development occurred. It is these two principles which have formed the matrix of study by all those who follow.

Alleyne is survived by his wife, Beverly Hall Alleyne, and five children: Malou, Trevor, Taji, Micha, and Malene, as well as other relatives, including brothers and sisters and eight grandchildren.

May his insights, influence, and commitment to the public good reverberate across the generations.

Notes

- * I am grateful to Jo-Anne S. Ferreira and Lowell Fiet for sharing some details that have assisted in the writing of this text.
- ¹ Walicek, Don E. 2013. "Linguistics for the Caribbean Region: An Interview with Mervyn Alleyne." Pp. 111-122 in *Sargasso: Language Policy and Language Rights in the Caribbean 2011-12*, II, edited by Walicek, Don E. and Celia Blake.
- ² Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1961. "Language and Society in St. Lucia." *Caribbean Studies* (1)1:1-10.
- ³ Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1971. "Acculturation and the Cultural Matrix of Creolization." Pp. 169-186 in *Pidginization and Creolization of Language*, edited by D. Hymes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁴ Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1980. *Comparative Afro-American: An Historical Comparative Study of English-based Afro-American Dialects of the New World*. Ann Arbor: Karoma.
- ⁵ Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1980. "Introduction." Pp. 1-17 in *Theoretical Orientations in Creole Studies*, edited by A. Valdman and A. Highfield. New York: Academic Press.
- ⁶ Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1988. *Roots of Jamaican Culture*. London: Pluto Press.
- ⁷ For the video of the panel at the center of this activity, visit *Conferencias Caribeñas* at www.archive.org.