

# FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE CARIBBEAN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION

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*President*

“Shifting the geography of reason.” That is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association. Dreamed of on the island of Jamaica in 2002 at the University of the West Indies at Mona during a series of discussions of what it means to be human after the restrictions placed on such a question by modern conquest and colonization, the organization was officially founded on the island of Barbados in 2004 at the first international conference with that motto as its calling. The importance of a “south to south” dialogue and of recognizing creolization as a hallmark of the modern experiment that created the Caribbean was a leitmotif of the meeting. And more, the ongoing commitment to the value of *ideas* was made particularly poignant by our realization that we were meeting at a time in which, more than ever, there was international affirmation of the desire for colonized people not to think. World events seem to make such an assessment an indictment on the epoch.

“The people in the Caribbean are not interested in theory,” an agitated scholar once told me.

I couldn’t accept his conclusion. It was a contradiction of terms. He was, after all, born in the Caribbean and grew up there before departing to the United States for his education, or perhaps miseducation, into its neurotic obsession at the level of ideas, ironically, with everything French, as Foucauldianism and Derridianism at the time attested. But even with that, wasn’t he included in the “people of the Caribbean”? Was not I, with my origins on the island of Jamaica and my complex childhood in the Bronx, New York, among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Trinidadians, Haitians,

and Antiguans, in neighborhoods invariably designated “black”?

Contemporary thought has a neurotic element that surfaces in contexts like the Caribbean. The intellectual is treated by most critics as anathema to “the people.” One seems to be able to be one of the people so long as one does not think. When thinking begins, it is as if one were plucked out of the crowd and pulled up among the clouds. This strange analytical contradiction of identity and performance, where one cannot *think* as a Caribbean person without being defined out of one’s community, has an additional negative consequence of making thought always external and dominating. Intellectuals supposedly come from the United States, Canada, and the Western European nations (especially France, England, and Germany), and what is left for Caribbean peoples is to celebrate the gospels that come every now and then from whomever is the most influential intellectual from up North, or North-by-northwest.

We find ourselves in already familiar “geographical” terrain. We *know* that there is thinking in the South, but the appearance of such thinking depends on neurotic conditions. How can such activities become visible in the bodies of people who challenge the scope of conditions of visibility that have been treated as complete? How can they demand more after announcements of there being nothing “outside” of the orthodoxy from above, from the political matrices of the north?

As I said, I didn’t accept my colleague’s conclusion. So I returned to the Caribbean, but I did so not only as that of a Native Son. I returned in the hope of offering the thought of my colleagues in philosophy of liberation, Africana philosophy, and my own work in postcolonial phenomenology in the service of epistemological decolonization, an act which I considered to be a mutually benefiting effort since, after all, there was so much for me to learn from a world so complex as the region of my birth. Why is the struggle against epistemological colonization important? It is by now a well known adage that although it is important to change the material conditions of enslavement, those who inherit the new

order would duplicate past evils if they cannot think otherwise. The world of knowledge, both a function of and an effect on the social world on which even culture is built, has the consequence of generating *kinds* of people. One project of the modern world has been the effort to create “happy” colonized people. Caribbean intellectuals from José Martí through to Marcus Garvey and later on to Frantz Fanon very astutely realized that as an obscene project. Connected to such a project is the notion of dependency; that some people should depend on other kinds of people for ideas through which to give meaning to their experience. What would the Caribbean be like, they seemed to ask, if the people there did not depend upon Europe for the legitimacy of their thought?

In the 1980s, Audre Lorde, a poet and scholar who stood among the best sages of the Caribbean, responded, in her collection *Sister Outsider*, that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. The result of this insight has, however, been both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has been a supporting premise against Eurocentrism, against the dialectics of recognition in which things European and white are better than the rest of the world. But on the other hand, it has also served as a rallying cry against theory, a form of activity that is supposedly exclusively Western. Part of the recovery and constructive work of Caribbean philosophy is to show that the latter thesis is false. The reader should notice that I used the words “recovery” and “constructive” here. The former is used because it is simply false that theory belongs solely to European civilizations. Connected to Lorde’s metaphor, we would be remiss to forget that slaves brought tools of their own to the New World and the indigenous people had their own tools prior to conquest. In other words, *tools* do not only belong to the master. The constructive side takes this insight further: Why should slaves and former slaves busy themselves with dismantling the master’s house? Why not use whatever resources at their disposal in the service of building alternative houses, other homes? Wouldn’t there be a changed meaning of the Big House, the Master’s House?

Thought from what Enrique Dussel has so aptly called “the underside of modernity” has unfortunately suffered a form of stratification in the role of negative critique at the end of the twentieth century. Much of this has been because of the impact of postmodernism, where there is greater preference for criticism over the creation of new thought. Yet, as we have just seen, such a path involves abandoning the possibility of building alternative homes of thought. Put differently, just as human beings need shelter or places in which to live, we also need such equivalents for our thought. Ideas dwell across the ages in the concepts and institutions human beings have built.

It is a goal of the Caribbean Philosophical Association to build a home for the ideas of and on Caribbean peoples. To achieve that goal, the Association has assembled an international community under the following mission:

The Caribbean Philosophical Association is an organization of scholars and lay-intellectuals dedicated to the study and generation of ideas with a particular emphasis of encouraging South-South dialogue. Although the focus is on engaging philosophy that emerges in the Caribbean, membership is not limited exclusively to scholars with degrees in philosophy, and any region and historic moment is open to the exchange of ideas. In similar kind, membership in the organization is not limited to professional scholars. Any one with an interest in theoretical and philosophical work can become a member. Finally, the Caribbean Philosophical Association is also dedicated to assisting with the development of institutions that would preserve thought in the Caribbean and facilitate the creation of new ideas.

The motto of shifting the geography of reason converges with this statement. For how reason has been mapped out across the modern epoch has been such that much of what the Caribbean Philosophical Association does will seem strange to organizations whose goal is to affirm the hegemony of the order of things as constituted by the North. Such an order depends, for instance, on a divide along national and linguistic lines. A terrible consequence of this has been the great distances between the Anglophone and

Latin Caribbean in spite of their geographical proximity. In effect, the geography of culture, of language and knowledge, proves greater than the challenges of the sea.

A catalyst in Anglo Caribbean philosophy has been the publication of Paget Henry's great work, *Caliban's Reason* in the year 2000. That work brought momentum to the question of Caribbean philosophy by offering a set of ideas that offered a home for at least a portion of this region's thought. Formulating concepts such as historicism and poeticism and examining the dialectic through which questions of Caribbean intellectual identities were unfolding, the text also advanced the value of creolization, in which the African ancestral voices were recognized as well as the European ones. Henry's recent work also involves lobbying for the Indo-Caribbean influences, and his arguments have set the stage for exploring what indigenous influences remain and, in some places such as Guyana and those along the Gulf of Mexico, continue to contribute to our understanding of Caribbean reality. That this text won the association's Frantz Fanon prize stimulated a reflection on how linguistic gaps can be bridged in the creolized reality of the New World. Fanon was, after all, Martinican, and it was the French, after all, who formulated the notion of Latin American. So it is quite odd that Fanon is not studied as a Latin American. In making the decision to meet across the linguistic boundaries of the Caribbean, the CPA has taken on this question of the Latin dimensions of the New World. To make this point clear, the CPA's second meeting was held in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the Association was generously hosted by the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe. It was also generously co-sponsored by the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. The Chancellor Dr. Gladys Escalona de Motta and Dean Jorge Rodríguez Beruff invited the CPA to return in the near future as guests of the university. The significance of the Centro was, however, unexpected. An institution devoted to archaeological and anthropological research, especially on the indigenous Caribbean, it turned out to be the right place for reflections on what it meant to

be human in the Caribbean and what such a reflection offers the rest of the world. The subtitle of that meetings calling was “Gender, Science, and Religion.” Underlying each was the continued significance of philosophical anthropology in the thought of the underside of modernity.

It was perhaps similar ancestral forces at work in the selection of the Frantz Fanon Prize. Two books were tied for the prize: Sibylle Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) and Alejandro J. De Oto’s *Fanon: política del sujeto poscolonial* (Mexico City, Mexico: El Centro de Estudios de Asia y África, El Colegio de México, 2003). The significance of a book that engages the ideas that emerged out of the Haitian Revolution and a book on one of the most revolutionary thinkers produced by the Caribbean, and that both were Francophone topics written in English and in Spanish, exemplified the themes of creolization, geography, and language that emerge in the effort to build a home for Caribbean thought. The obvious solution was not only to award both books but to make it policy that the prize goes to a book in English, Spanish, and French, with room for more as circumstances demand. This decision has led to a variety of projects ranging from book translations to planned meetings that include, down the road, Veracruz in Mexico, Salvador in Brazil, the island of Martinique, and an eventual return to Puerto Rico.

The meeting at Puerto Rico was also marked by so many representatives of so many dimensions of thought from the underside. Among many were Ramabai Espinet, the Indo-Caribbean novelist and poet; Sylvester James Gates, Jr., the African American physicist who is well known for his work in string theory; Natalija Micunivic, the Serbian scholar on critical theory and critic of European nationalism; Enrique Dussel, philosopher, historian and theologian from Argentina and now Mexico; Linda Alcoff, the famed feminist theorist, epistemologist, and proponent of Latin American philosophy; Carlos Rojas Osorio, whose work on Puerto Rican philosophy revealed that he and Paget Henry were

ironically working together without knowledge of each other's work; and of course, Puerto Rico's Native Son, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, whose work in philosophy of liberation and in making sure that the Caribbean home is one in which Hispanophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Anglophone communities live together is a source of pride for us all.

Part of shifting the geography of reason requires fighting the forces of disciplinary decadence. Reductionistic academics treat their disciplines as closed affairs. Their work is simply the application of a sewn-up method. This unfortunate attitude has been one that has dominated much recent philosophy. It is a plague on North American and European philosophy, where not only are such notions of method treated by the majority of scholars as pretty much locked in the analytical-Continental divide, but also in the credo of legitimacy-as-thought-coming-solely-from-the-north. This affliction is not limited to philosophers. It infects many other disciplines as well. The result is a form of decadence in which scholars with such views would stand appalled at the diversity of ideas and their sources in the Caribbean and, by implication, the Caribbean Philosophical Association. We see the dialectical unfolding of a double conscious reality. One world, treating itself as complete, announces its universality. Those trapped in its claims of particularity can see that their dominators have confused their own particularity as universality. The North announces universality; the South, when freed from the yoke of North-centrism, sees only a conflated particularity hovering above them and begin to question, as well, the notions of "above" and "below." A philosopher from the North may look at a meeting of South-South thinkers and conclude with an answer to a question that is entirely out of place: "Only some of the participants are philosophers; only half or so have doctorates in philosophy." Is philosophy only an activity for people with degrees in the discipline? And even if so, does it follow that philosophers could only learn from people within its own discipline? In my own work, I have characterized this mentality, this attitude, as disciplinary decadence. It is when

thought becomes closed, when the teleological life of thinking collapses into the pure assertion of disciplinary correctness. It is philosophers who criticize other scholars for not being philosophers; historians who criticize others for not being historical; literary scholars who do the same; and natural scientists who do such. In response, I have suggested that scholars engage in a form of teleological suspension of their disciplines. This is a paradoxical act of invigorating thought by going beyond disciplinary boundaries. It is to do what, ironically, many philosophers in the past did. For instance, most of the Western philosophical canon consists of individuals who were either not formally trained philosophers or who were not recognized in their time as philosophers because of their unorthodox views.

It would be an error, however, to take it that the teleological suspension of disciplinarity simply means interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity requires the disciplines to meet as whole units or discrete members of a collective. What teleological suspension suggests is the possibility of creating something that is not simply a reinscription of what precedes it; it may mean to create a *new* discipline, or, perhaps one day, going beyond disciplinarity itself. Although many have tried to “domesticate” or “discipline” Caribbean thinking, a cursory study of Caribbean intellectual life would reveal the importance of that multifaceted term “writer.” Like the creolization and the realities of labor in the Caribbean, the intellectual also wears many hats, works through many disciplines, all of which are guided by the teleological force of thought itself. In the Caribbean, it is admitted that although it is important to know where one is going, it is always a good idea to formulate a few alternative routes.

On behalf of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, I would like to thank our Secretary of the Hispanophone Caribbean, Dr. Nelson Maldonado-Torres for editing this special issue on Caribbean philosophy for *Caribbean Studies* and to universities and people of Puerto Rico, who were so kind as to offer the Caribbean Philosophical Association refuge and sustenance in its perilous and important journey.