Afro-Caribbean Philosophy: An Introduction
Paget Henry

This special issue of the CLR James Journal focuses on a highly neglected area of Caribbean cultural life: its philosophy. Although philosophy has been an integral part of much of the writing done in the region, very little effort has been devoted to analyzing its nature and identity. A cursory look at our patterns of discursive use will reveal the hiddeness and neglect that characterize our philosophical practice.

Caribbean philosophy has existed and continues to exist as the under-thematized, pre-theoretical foundations of creative work in more established disciplines such as economics, political science, literature, history and the arts. We are yet to release our philosophy from this implicit subterranean existence and explicitly recognize its place and status in the division of labor between our disciplines. The essays in this issue examine aspects of the philosophy of CLR James, and link them to a number of broader issues such as authenticity, traditional African philosophy, and Marxism. In taking up this philosophical project, we are fulfilling one of the promised goals of this journal: to be a forum for the general ideas (not only James's) that inform and cut across the intellectual and social practices of Caribbean people.

At a minimum, philosophy is an activity of discursive understanding in which information is organized, arguments made, and conclusions reached via the exercise of the human faculty of reason. Philosophy gives us the timeless view of the world as disclosed by reason and is a celebration of reason. However, in spite of its quest for universal and ahistorical truths, philosophical production, like all discursive production, is rooted in history and shaped by the cultural context in which it is practiced. Consequently, in some societies (or in different periods of the same society)
philosophy may be inseparable from religion (Hindu philosophy), from science (positivism), or from politics (Marxism). Thus, in spite of its current presentation of self in Western academia, philosophy has never been a pure isolated form of contemplation. It has always had real organic connections to human self-understanding, and thus to the other discourses that are also engaged in this vital undertaking.

The struggle to liberate the self, to house it in an authentic world of our own making has been at the heart of the life of reason in the Caribbean. This struggle has given Caribbean philosophy much of its unique and original contents. Originality and distinctness mark not only the contents of Caribbean philosophy, but also its discursive forms and patterns of institutional recognition. These features of our philosophy have been shaped by the colonial problematics and contours of our cultural history.

The original contents of Caribbean philosophy emerged as discursive requirements for projects of self-understanding, colonial domination and historical liberation that were central to lives of four major social groups: the Amerindians, Euro-Caribbeans, Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans. Here our focus is on the Afro-Caribbean contribution. This contribution can be divided into three broad phases: the idealism of traditional African religion, the Christian moralism that combined with or displaced African idealism, and the poeticism and historicism that have dominated the late and post-colonial periods.

The idealist labelling of the first phase should be taken as an indicator of the dominant role of spirit in this philosophical system. However, this dominance should not be equated with exclusivity. On the contrary, traditional African philosophy has been marked by the coexistence of a number of competing themes in well integrated totalities. Thus, in addition to its idealist themes, we also find strong existential, moral, cosmic,
empirical and communal themes in the philosophy that Africans brought with them to the Caribbean.

The moralism of the Christian phase is also a complex formation. Although its central concern was the struggle between good and evil, we also find submerged historicist tendencies that will become dominant in the post-colonial period. Further this moral discourse was in varying degrees a hybrid one. Depending on class location, this discourse was more or less heavily mixed with themes from traditional African religion.

Needless to say, this underlying complexity continues and increases in the poeticist/historicist period. This period is marked by the emancipating projects of writer/activists such as Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, CLR James, and a little later those of Frantz Fanon, Wilson Harris, Edouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, George Lamming, Sylvia Wynter and others. These projects required either the taking or the working out of philosophical positions as prefaces to their incorporation in poetic, historical, political or economic discourses. The result was a multiplying of subtextual philosophical positions that would be difficult to categorize here. It must suffice to say that both the historicism and poeticism of this period can be further distinguished by their efforts to incorporate some competing themes and to vigorously reject others.

The speaking, writing, practicing, institutionalizing or non-institutionalizing of this tradition of philosophy has been shaped by the broader colonial framework within which the cultures of Africa, India, and Europe were forced to co-exist and mix in the societies of the region. As Rex Nettleford has pointed out, this framework was one in which Indian and African cultures were locked in a "battle for space" with the inflated claims of European culture. Reinforced by the colonial state, this battle institutionalized marginal positions for both Indian and African cultures. This marginalization became the basis for a hierarchy and a pattern of distorted
communication between dominant and subordinate cultures. The hierarchical relationship ensured the dominance of European culture irrespective of whether the cultural form was religion, art, music or dance. The distorted communicative relation ensured that a whole class of issues and counter-claims regarding the marginalization of African and Indian cultures would be excluded from the community of established discourse.

In all colonial institutions of learning, European texts became the works of formal instruction just as European languages became the media of formal communication. Plato, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, J.S. Mill and other Europeans became the only recognized philosophers. Excluded and unrecognized were the great Indian sages such as Shankara, Nagajuna or Aurobindo. Even more so were the African griots who left behind "only" oral traditions, as well as their literate Caribbean counterparts such as Garvey or Padmore.

Particularly with Afro-Caribbeans, these institutional and communicative inequalities became the crucial markers of difference between Afro-Caribbean dance, folklore, music, or religion, and their European counterparts. In the cases of these imaginative and dramatic arts, this hierarchical and communicative framework of colonial inequality at least acknowledged their existence as distinct traditions. This was not so in the case of philosophy and the more rationally oriented discourses. A distinct tradition of philosophical thought from Africa was not acknowledged by the unequal discursive arrangements within which African and European cultures co-existed and mixed in the Caribbean. Africa was philosophically disenfranchised by the liberal thought of Caribbean and American states. Its philosophy was excluded from the community of established discourse. The truth claims of African philosophy, its challenges to marginalization, its claim to a seat at the table of discourse were among those claims and challenges that were vetoed by
the distorted communicative relations between European and African cultures.

This negating of African philosophy was reinforced and maintained by the exclusive and hegemonic manner in which European philosophy constructed its history and identity. Philosophical reason was the unique gift of Greece, which provided Western civilization with the mark that distinguished it from other cultures. Not surprisingly, the systematic exclusion of non-Western forms of philosophy from the practice of philosophy, has been an integral part of the self-formative process of Western philosophy. For example, building on a well established tradition, Hegel acknowledged that a form of idealism existed in India. However, this was an "idealism of the imagination" and not of thought. As such, Indian idealism sprang from a dream-like state of consciousness, which Hegel associated with the childhood of the human race. Because of its lack of "definite conceptions," and its close association with religion, Hegel was reluctant to call Indian idealism philosophy. At best, it was a stage in the pre-history of philosophy, which had been superseded by European philosophy.

In Hegel's account of the historical development of philosophy, Africa had no place. Africa, he suggested, "is no historical part of the world." It was outside of history: "What we properly understand by Africa is the Unhistorical Undeveloped Spirit." As Undeveloped Spirit, the crucial mark of African cultural life was that "consciousness has not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence." Consequently, "knowledge of an absolute being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, was entirely wanting." Without the above realization and the knowledge it generates, there could be no philosophy. For Hegel, Africa did not possess even an idealism of the imagination. To the extent that Africans thought, it was exclusively within a magical discourse. If philosophy had to be separated from
religion, then a fortiori it had to be separated from magic. On these grounds, Africa was excluded from the history of philosophy.

By extending these systematic exclusions to philosophical traditions across the globe, philosophy became synonymous with European philosophy. All other traditions were part of the pre-history of philosophy. The life of reason and its celebration could now become the defining marks of Western civilization, at the same time they had to be minimized or denied in other cultures.

It is significant that neither James nor Fanon, two Caribbean philosophers whose works were profoundly influenced by Hegel, never really took him to task for his position on third world philosophy or his imperial construction of European philosophy. Appropriating the theory of self-consciousness (Fanon) and the progressive historical aspects of Hegel (James), both ignored Hegel's exclusion of Africans from his dialectics of self-consciousness and his dialectics of history.

Mirroring the globally dominant posture of Europe, this was the hegemonic conception of European philosophy that African philosophy had to co-exist and mix with in the Caribbean. As the colonial order and physical violence of imperial Europe represented the negation of local African societies, so the hegemonic claims and the symbolic violence of European philosophy represented the social death of African philosophy in the Caribbean. In colonial schools and universities, reason was cultivated exclusively through the reading of Greek and Latin classics, and the works of modern European philosophy. From this education, the Afro-Caribbean philosophical imagination developed a dependent over-identification with the Western tradition which suppressed its difference from Europe, burdened it with Eurocentric assumptions and anti-African biases.

Not surprisingly, the Afro-Caribbean philosophy that subsequently developed was marked by this pattern of over-
identification with European philosophy and a corresponding under-identification with African philosophy. The latter philosophy was, and to a large extent still is, invisibly in the Afro-Caribbean tradition in spite of its concerns for Africa. Thus, whether it is the works of Blyden, Garvey, Padmore, James, or Fanon, seldom if ever do we find them looking to Africa, or to Africans in the region, for philosophical ideas. These ideas were appropriated from European traditions even in cases where our philosophers were critiquing colonialism, racism, and Eurocentrism. The appropriating of European Liberalism, racialism, and Marxism are cases in point. These were appropriated in a fashion that allowed Caribbean philosophers to critique colonialism while at the same time deepening, or at least not challenging, the over-identification with European thought. The consequences for Afro-Caribbean philosophy are clear when we compare the impact of James's fictional and philosophical writings. Both have had a tremendous impact on Caribbean intellectual life. However, the fictional works have contributed to the growth of a distinct body of Afro-Caribbean literature in a way that the philosophical works have not produced a corresponding result. This difference is related to the persistence of the above patterns of over- and under-identification in philosophy and to their collapse in literature.

Such a break with colonial patterns of identification clearly occurred in the literature of the nationalist period. This occurrence was in part the result of the opening of the literary imagination to its African roots and to the experiences of the Creole self that had emerged from the encounter with imperial Europe. In Caribbean music and dance, it is doubtful whether such deep patterns of over- and under-identification were ever established. If they were, the corresponding breaks must have occurred even earlier than in the case of literature. In both music and dance, distinct identities from their European counterparts have also been rooted in the affirmation of the
African heritage, and the Creole identity.

Compared to the Creole identities of Afro-Caribbean music, dance, literature, languages, and to some extent religion, the strong European identity of Afro-Caribbean philosophy presents a striking contrast. Hiding behind the universalistic claims and linear assumptions of European philosophy, Afro-Caribbean philosophy has tied (departmentalized?) its fate to European philosophy and has abandoned the universalistic and linear possibilities within its own Creole and nationalist identity. These unrealized possibilities constitute the highly neglected areas of Afro-Caribbean philosophy. However, these possibilities will not be realized without a dramatic shift in our attitude towards African philosophy. We must engage and evaluate the problematics and insights of both traditional and modern African philosophy in ways that we have done in language, music, dance, religion, and literature.

How much longer can our philosophy continue in this state of unbalanced identification and related neglect of the African side of the Caribbean Creole self? I would like to suggest three reasons why this condition cannot be maintained much longer. The first is the receding of the colonial era, which has increased the importance of local factors in identity formation. As our sense of difference increases, the legitimacy of this over-identification with European philosophy will erode.

Second, the linear and universalistic assumptions of Western philosophy are breaking down. It is our responsibility to participate in the deconstructing of this Behemoth. We must make a radical break with the above assumptions that have supported the hegemonic construction of European philosophy, and with the restrictive definitions that have been used to exclude non-Western traditions. These must be replaced by a comparative approach to philosophy, which recognizes the peculiar stamps that tradition and history leave on philosophical practices. In this approach, the necessary universalistic claims of reason never reach their desired goal,
as they too must carry the impact of a specific culture and history.

Third, the persistence and dynamism of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, African, and other traditions of philosophy will have an increasing impact on the Caribbean philosophical imagination. The growth of the African tradition in particular is likely to shake us out of our state of over-identification. As the identity and problematics of African philosophy become more clearly established, we will discover that many of them are there in texts of Blyden, Garvey, James, and Fanon, and in our responses to Afro-Caribbean religions such as Shango, Cumfa, Voodoo, and Rastafarianism.

These three reasons for an impending collapse of our over-identification with European philosophy suggest that we may be on the verge of a philosophical awakening; an awakening to the African half of our philosophical heritage. The essays in this volume should contribute to this awakening of the Afro-Caribbean philosophical imagination to its destined second encounter with Africa. Together they reveal the blindness, the insightful achievements and the self-misrepresentations that have resulted from our unbalanced patterns of identification. They are able to make this contribution because they occupy some of the discursive spaces that have been opened up by the deconstructing of the hegemonic and universalistic claims of European philosophy. As the paper by Althea Trotman makes clear, these imbalances in our relations with European and African thought raise questions regarding the authenticity of the philosophical voices that have been speaking to us. Analyzing the positions of James and Gramsci on the tensions between hegemonic production and authenticity, Trotman uses the results to address these issues of authenticity in our philosophical voices.

In my paper, I take up the problem of the under-identification of Afro-Caribbean philosophy with its African heritage. Using the work of James, I examine in detail some
of the likely reasons for the absence of traditional African thought in the works of this distinguished Caribbean philosopher.

In the face of these developments, our task must be the full exploration of the discursive spaces that have been opened up by the displacing of the hegemonic construction of European philosophy. Out of these explorations must come a new phase in Afro-Caribbean philosophy. In this phase, we need to achieve the full re-enfranchisement of African philosophy in the region.

3 Ibid, p. 139
4 Ibid, p. 99
5 Ibid, p. 99
6 Ibid, p. 93
7 Ibid, p. 93