

## **CPA 2005 Meeting**

### **SUMMARY 2nd Annual Caribbean Philosophical Meeting June 1-4, 2005 in San Juan, Puerto Rico**

Approximately 160 scholars met at the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, at the second annual meeting of the Caribbean Philosophical Association. The theme of the conference was Shifting the Geography of Reason II: Gender, Religion, and Science.

The few days leading up to the conference were mercilessly hot and humid, and the cobbled stone streets of Old San Juan necessitated much walking, which was at first difficult because of the hills) but eventually exhilarating. (It's wonderful that our bodies are able to adapt to environments so well; in the midst of immediate pain is a future around the corner of strides and physical exemplifications of renewed strength.) The conference was spectacular. The folks in Puerto Rico were very proud to have the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA) meeting there, and they never ceased to show it. The Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe was once a seminary. It was transformed by Ricardo E. Alegría, the famous archaeologist specializing in precolonial Caribbean cultures and history, into a research institute in pre-modern Caribbean and Central American archaeology that confers masters and doctoral degrees. It's very beautiful, with a magnificent courtyard and many pretty flowers growing out of broken pots. (The motif of the broken pots from which beautiful things grow is, perhaps, also a metaphor for modern Caribbean peoples.)

The CPA kicked off the first night with a fiesta—which consisted of local Puerto Rican dishes, much rum and beer, and a DJ spinning music for salsa and meringue dancing. After welcoming the participants, the president, Lewis Gordon, explained that the CPA begins with a fiesta so people can be more comfortable with each other throughout the conference. (It's a good approach, for that is exactly what happened. Many people spent the evening talking and drinking and dancing together, which made them comfortable engaging each other's ideas.) Ms. Sula Gordon (five years old) then took to the stage and danced up an act that would have made both Tito Fuente and Harry Belafonte proud. Groups continued celebrating well into the evening at the different hotels and apartments in the old city, many of which were near Castillo San Cristóbal (St. Christopher's fort) overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The poetry of the Caribbean Philosophical Association attempting to shift the geography of reason right in the face of a monument to Spanish colonialism, which began in the New World with Columbus, who imposed the hegemony of European reason by way of the crucifix and the sword, was immediately felt by the participants.

The next day began the formal papers. The opening session consisted of wonderful greetings by Dr. Miguel Rodríguez López, Rector of the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe; Dra. Gladys Escalona de Motta, Rectora, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras; and Dr. Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, Decano, Facultad de Estudios Generales, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras. Dra. Escalona de Motta invited the CPA to be the inaugurating conference at the future

conference center that will be built on the campus at Río Piedras. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, CPA secretary of the Hispanophone Caribbean, then greeted the audience and he and Lewis Gordon thanked the directors and the people of Puerto Rico for welcoming the CPA. Gordon then gave a brief talk on the importance! of shifting the geography of reason and building institutions of intellectual exchange and recognition in subaltern communities. He spoke of the influence of Audre Lorde's dictum that the master's tool cannot tear down the master's house; that although it may not have been her intent, her adage has had a very anti-intellectual effect. Moreover, Gordon asked, why must the project focus on using tools to tear down the master's house instead of building alternative houses and developing alternative tools? "Why not," he asked, "build houses of our own?" Why not build alternative institutions that transcend the dialectics of subordinated recognition? He closed with a parable of miscommunication and toppling walls in the colonial context before introducing Linda Alcoff, who was the first plenary speaker. She spoke on Walter Mignolo's semiosis of geopolitics and geoeistemology. Participants then broke out into the three rooms in which there were simultaneous sessions with topics ranging from Frantz Fanon's phenomenology to problems in philosophy of science and East Indian transcendental phenomenology. The day concluded with a plenary presentation on Puerto Rican philosophy by Carlos Rojas Osorio, the leading scholar on Latin Caribbean thought.

The second day of papers began with the awarding of the Frantz Fanon Prize for Outstanding Book in Caribbean Thought. Gordon explained that the books were chosen because of their excellent scholarship and the discussions they stimulated. In ! other words, it is the quality of discussion stimulated by the books that led to their nominations and eventual votes. This year's recipients were Sibylle Fischer, for *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, *Fanon: política del sujeto poscolonial* (Mexico City, Mexico: El Centro de Estudios de Asia y Africa, El Colegio de México, 2003). Clevis Headley (Vice President) and Neil Roberts (Graduate secretary) commented on Fischer's text and Marina Banchetti-Robino (CPA Publications) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres commented on De Oto's. Both authors provided a brief reply in which they expressed their delight in the commentators offering criticisms of their texts as well.

After the simultaneous sessions, which included discussions of feminism and indigenous thought in Central America to Caribbean men of letters and Africana women of letters, Paget Henry introduced Sylvester James Gates, Jr., the famed physicist and string theorist, who gave a plenary talk in which he pointed out, among many things, the kinds of perception that emerge at the level of higher-order mathematics and asked the audience to imagine what might happen if the style of Africana cultures were to meet mathematics in the physics equivalent of jazz. The evening concluded with a discussion between several board of officers of the CPA and the President, Elio Kan Mansferrer, and Board Member Sylvia Marcos, of the Latin American Association for the Study of Religion and with Enrique Dussel. The meeting concluded with an agreement to meet in Mexico in 2007, perhaps in Veracruz. In addition, there was a long, lively session on portraits of race ranging from racial eliminativism and constructions of whiteness and Indo-Caribbeans as "koolies," to the political dynamics of complexion, that went on until

8:30 in the evening.

The concluding day was devoted to continued sessions on post-European science and Post-European philosophy to metaphilosophical discussions on Caribbean philosophy, Africana philosophy, and philosophy of education, and a powerful session on the writings of Ramabai Espinet, the Indo-Caribbean novelist and poet. There were also sessions that examined connections between Caribbean racialization and the racialization of Serbs and Romanians and one on the thought of Enrique Dussel. Linda Alcoff introduced Enrique Dussel, whose plenary lecture was a panoramic world systems historical analysis. The concluding session consisted of awarding Carlos Rojas Osorio a plaque in recognition of his important contribution to Caribbean Thought and to the Centro for hosting the conference and for its contributions to the study of ideas in the Caribbean. Rojas Osario then spoke briefly on the value of Caribbean philosophy.

The Vice President and secretaries gave summary reports. Headley noted that three participants took out life-time memberships of \$1000.00 each, and that Temple University, Florida Atlantic University, and Howard University provided additional financial support for the meeting, and that the CPA will begin a drive to build up an endowment for the future. He also stressed the importance of departmental memberships. Banchetti-Robino announced that the Frantz Fanon Prize will now be awarded annually to three texts—one Francophone, another Hispanophone, and one Anglophone. Headley and Banchetti-Robino also announced that the proceedings will be published by Cambridge Scholars Press. Paget Henry announced that The C.L.R. James Journal will now be the official journal of the CPA. Gordon announced that future meetings will be as follows: 2006, Montreal, Canada; 2007, Mexico; 2008, Jamaica; 2009, Trinidad; 2010, Martinique.

Gordon then gave a short concluding talk on modern philosophy's bad reputation among communities of color but that without active engagement in the construction of thought that interprets experience, such communities would be under the yoke of epistemological colonization. He argued that ideas have a role to play, and that it is important for "peripheral" peoples to free themselves from the dialectics of recognition that call for only the dominant and dominating ways of doing things. An example he gave is the distinction between de-mystification and de-mythologization. A failure to understand this difference leads to the mistaken attack on the mythopoetics of thought instead of addressing problems of false beliefs and erroneous reasoning. There is, he argued, a fundamental incompleteness to reason that offers a mythic form; it is, as Jaspers observed, the philosopher's hymn and hope. He then pointed out that although many meetings claim to be diverse, none, to his knowledge, reflected the embodied diversity of thought as the audience that sat before him. It would be a mistake, he suggested, to call the meeting interdisciplinary; it was, he argued, a teleological suspension of disciplinarity itself in the important conviction that a meeting of ideas truly matters. He then poured libations for the ancestors in whose memory and hopes the association was founded, thanked the participants for putting such care into their papers, and invited Ramabai Espinet to close the session with a reading of some of her poems. She chose, appropriately, to read her very moving poem of defiance in Trinidadian creole entitled, "Indian Robber Talk." Ramabai Espinet's poem, which is a work in progress, can be

found at: Ramabai Espinet, "The Indian Robber Speaks," *DIVA: A Literary Journal of Women of South Asian Origin* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1993/94). —. "Indian Robber Talk," *ABSINTHE*. Special Issue 1993.

### **SOME REMARKS FROM PARTICIPANTS:**

I was delighted to be a witness to and participate in the signs of an actual shift in the geography of reason that positions reason on a multicentered map that includes the Caribbean, and that reconfigures reason too as the result of more symbiotic forms of thinking that emphasize synergy rather than individualism. — Serena Anderlini

Let me begin by congratulating the planning committee on organizing such a stimulating and intellectually exciting conference. I was very pleased to be invited to participate in your deliberations and cannot express my appreciation enough for the convening of the panel on *The Swinging Bridge*. I look forward to the growth of the Caribbean Philosophical Association in the years to come - the necessity for such an association cannot be overstated. More power to all of you who pulled it off with such limited resources! — Ramabai Espinet

I want to congratulate you and other officers by the successful of the event. It's impressed me veru much to see the well planned the event was. On the other hand, my institution requires a note indicating of my participation in the event. I will appreciate any help you may provide me. — Celso Vargas

Back in Babylon-Germany, I am still trying to sort out and digest all the pictures, emotions, information, human qualities, intellectual skills and knowledge I have been blessed with during this enriching and empowering CPA 2005 Annual Meeting in Puerto Rico. They are full in my mind, heart and soul. ! I will tell the Black Community in Germany and Europe and our People on the Continent about this experience and I hope that we will be many more to join CPA Meetings and activities in the coming years. Also, I am certain that your example will encourage and empower us here to set up similar structures that will allow us to network with you more successfully in the future . Please extend my fraternal and friendly regards and thanks to all the Leaders and Members of the CPA and the participants to the 2005 meeting. The struggle continues! — Senfo Tonkam

[The conference] was amazing. When I tell people here I was at a conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, they imagine I spent time on the beach and just having fun. I tell them, yes, indeed I had a great time and fun, but not at the ! beach, rather going to papers, meeting new people, and just talking philosophy with people. That is a true mark of a great conference. I enjoyed every paper I heard, learned so much, and it gave renewed enthusiasm for getting back to my own work. [The president's] closing comments were superb—they showed [his] respect for everyone, the association and the enthusiasm you have for it and all of us. I liked the fact that the old and new integrated and communicated with each other so well. Being among the "old" ones, we loved it. Thanks so much for everything. Given what I said above, I would have only one suggestion for the next conference: maybe have one afternoon where there is free time to

explore the city, and then have an evening plenary session with reception. Again thanks, and both Bernie and I plan to attend next year in Montreal. — Jan Boxill