



Caribbean Studies
Universidad de Puerto Rico
viiglesias@rrpac.upr.clu.edu
ISSN (Versión impresa): 0008-6533
PUERTO RICO

2005
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PHILOSOPHY
Caribbean Studies, July-December, año/vol. 33, número 002
Universidad de Puerto Rico
San Juan, Puerto Rico
pp. 3-34

Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal

Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México

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THE PROMISE OF CARIBBEAN PHILOSOPHY: HOW IT CAN CONTRIBUTE TO A 'NEW DIALOGIC' IN PHILOSOPHY¹

Jennifer Lisa Vest

ABSTRACT

The Caribbean is a site where multiple cultures, peoples, ways of thinking and acting have come together and where new forms of philosophy are emerging. The promise of Caribbean philosophy lays in its ability to give shape to an intellectual tradition which is both true to and beneficial to Caribbean peoples while simultaneously being provocative enough to engage wisdom-seekers of various geographies and identities. I argue that only by pursuing a “New Dialogic” which engages the philosophical traditions of Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans can we hope to assert a unique philosophy of value to Caribbean peoples and cultures. The highest form of Caribbean philosophy thus must be plural and dialogical. Unfortunately, dialogues in philosophy have been typically characterized by a fixation with Europe, and a lack of consideration of other philosophical traditions or sources. The “New Dialogic” that I propose here involves a more dynamic model of dialogue to open or intensify different and multiple avenues of conceptual elaboration. I provide general guidelines or principles for this “New Dialogic” and demonstrate the extent to which Caribbean philosophers can both contribute to the expansion of this project and be aided by it in their formulations of the field.

Keywords: dialogic, cross-cultural, African, Caribbean, dialogues, intercultural

RESUMEN

El Caribe es una región donde se han juntado múltiples culturas, pueblos, formas de pensamiento y acción y donde también se van creando nuevas formas de éstos. La promesa de la filosofía caribeña consta en poder darle forma a una tradición intelectual

genuinamente caribeña y de beneficio a los pueblos caribeños mientras es a la vez lo suficientemente provocadora para despertar el interés e involucrar en su discurso a pensadores de varias regiones e identidades. Mi contención principal es que solamente a través de una “Nueva Dialógica” que involucre a las tradiciones filosóficas de africanos, africano-americanos, y nativo-americanos podremos tener la esperanza de una filosofía de valor a los pueblos del Caribe y sus culturas. La expresión más alta de la filosofía caribeña debe pues ser plural y dialógica. Desafortunadamente, diálogos filosóficos han estado típicamente caracterizados por una fijación con Europa y una falta de consideración de otras fuentes o tradiciones filosóficas. La “Nueva Dialógica” que propongo envuelve un modelo más dinámico de diálogo para abrir e intensificar las múltiples y distintas avenidas de elaboración conceptual. Proveo principios o guías generales para esta “Nueva Dialógica” y demuestro la forma en que filósofas y filósofos del Caribe pueden contribuir a este proyecto y ser asistidos por el mismo en sus formulaciones del campo.

Palabras clave: dialógica, multi-cultural, africano, caribeño, diálogos, intercultural

RÉSUMÉ

La Caraïbe n'est pas seulement un endroit où divers cultures, peuples, formes de pensée et d'action se sont mêlés, mais aussi c'est une région où de nouvelles formes de philosopher sont en train d'émerger. La promesse de la philosophie caribéenne réside dans sa capacité à mettre en forme une tradition intellectuelle véritable et favorable aux peuples caribéens, tout en étant suffisamment provocatrice pour éveiller de l'intérêt et convoquer dans son discours des penseurs de régions et d'identités plurielles. Je propose que c'est n'est qu'en poursuivant une « Nouvelle Dialogique », qui intégrerait les traditions philosophiques des africains, des afro-américains et des natif américains, que nous pourrions affirmer une véritable philosophie, valable aux peuples et aux cultures caribéennes. L'expression la plus élevée de la philosophie doit être donc, plurielle et dialogique. Malheureusement, les dialogues philosophiques ont été d'habitude caractérisés par un attachement à l'Europe et par un

manque de considération envers d'autres sources ou traditions philosophiques. La « Nouvelle Dialogique » que je propose comprend un modèle de dialogue plus dynamique à fin d'ouvrir et d'élargir les voies différentes et multiples de l'élaboration conceptuelle. Je fournis des guides et des principes généraux pour cette « Nouvelle Dialogique » et je démontre les formes dont les philosophes de la Caraïbe, hommes et femmes, peuvent aussi bien contribuer à l'expansion de ce projet qu'à y trouver un appui pour leurs formulations dans ce domaine.

Mots-clés: dialogique, transculturel, africain, acriben, dialogues, interculturel

Received: 3 November 2005. Revision received: 28 March 2006. Accepted: 29 March 2006.

What does the articulation and formulation of Caribbean philosophy as an academic field promise to do? And how best can we keep the promises this gathering together of texts and scholars seems to make? What oaths must we make? What responsibilities must we shoulder? What will Caribbean philosophy do for Caribbean people? How can Caribbean philosophers give shape to an intellectual tradition which is both true and beneficial to Caribbean peoples while simultaneously being provocative enough to engage wisdom-seekers of various geographies and identities? These are some of the questions I think Caribbean philosophers must ask. But these are also the questions that have already been asked by African philosophers, African American philosophers and Native American philosophers in formulating their own academic fields. Given these prior conversations and given the political and ancestral affinities these projects may share, I suggest that it would be beneficial for Caribbean philosophers to dialogue with African, Native American and Afro-US philosophers. I further suggest that such a dialogue be part of a larger project that I refer to as “*The New Dialogic*.”²

This *New Dialogic*, as I have formulated it, involves the

expansion, re-formulation and interrogation of academic philosophy through a shift in focus and method which, among other considerations, privileges South-South dialogues over North/South, East/West, or Western dialogues.³ Philosophers guided by this new approach would focus on debates and dialogues between African and Native American, Asian and Latin American or Caribbean and African philosophies instead of engaging primarily in comparisons between Western and non-Western thought. Given the convergence of cultures, races, and traditions that already obtain in the Caribbean, it is an ideal place for the creation of works guided by the *New Dialogic*.⁴ The Caribbean, both in its fantastic diversity and its political and historical unity, promises to give birth to a philosophy unique and specific in its own right and it must do more than build upon prior work in African, African American, and Native American philosophies. Because the Caribbean is characterized by a complex coming together of various racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural traditions and identities and because it is generated from a fusion of Asian, African, Indigenous and European cultures and peoples it makes sense for Caribbean philosophy to dialogue with these other traditions.⁵ This is especially true given the fact that the articulation of new academic fields in philosophy entails the identification of texts and traditions from which to depart.

Debates taking place in African, Asian, Black and Native American philosophy can be fruitfully examined by Caribbean philosophers. The benefits that such dialogues afford Caribbean philosophers are many. Most important among these I would argue are lessons that can be learned from other traditions. I will list some of them here. In turn, Caribbean philosophers can complicate and interrogate African and Native American philosophical projects. Such dialogues would also benefit philosophy as a whole because they would form part of a larger project, the *New Dialogic* that is guided by the goal of benefiting all philosophers generally, and those in the South particularly. The formulation of Caribbean philosophy therefore can provide an important site for

the ever-expanding *New Dialogic* project and the *New Dialogic* can aid Caribbean philosophers in its formulation of the field.

What is the *New Dialogic*?

The *New Dialogic* is a proposal that seeks to expand and redefine the discipline of philosophy by a shift in focus, a change in method, and a willingness to completely re-define its central questions. As such it is a metaphilosophical move. Modern mainstream philosophy is in crisis and in need of a constructive revision; it has come to define itself in ways which render it incapable of addressing the exigencies of the contemporary world and thus a radical reconstruction is needed. Both the anti-metaphysical, anti-spiritual, and anti-ethical repercussions of the Analytic turn and the nihilistic repercussions of the post-modern Continental turn forestall the creation of positive and meaningful movements in mainstream philosophy. Although many non-Western philosophers are creating new and interesting forms of philosophy, mainstream philosophy is incapable, as currently defined, of incorporating the work of non-western philosophers. Something new is needed. We need new dialogues in philosophy. We need a *New Dialogic*.

The *New Dialogic* that I propose seeks to remedy some of these problems through a shift in method and orientation which entails the use of cross-cultural dialogues as a means of formulating questions, evaluating ways of knowing, and working out important ideas. The *New Dialogic* is distinguished from works that call themselves comparative, cross-cultural, intercultural, or world philosophy while only comparing European and Asian traditions. The field of *Comparative Philosophy*, for example, is defined in terms of comparisons between European and American or European and Asian (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, or Indian) philosophies, and even these philosophers find it difficult getting published in mainstream philosophy journals. An example of this problematic East/West approach is found in journals such as *Philosophy East and West*. It defines its goals in the following way:

Promoting academic literacy on non-Western traditions of philosophy, *Philosophy East and West* has for over half a century published the highest-quality scholarship that locates these cultures in their relationship to Anglo-American philosophy. Philosophy defined in its relationship to cultural traditions broadly integrates the professional discipline with literature, science, and social practices. Each issue includes debates on issues of contemporary concern and critical reviews of the most recent publications.⁶

By defining “East” as Asian and by limiting its discussion of Asian philosophy to comparisons with Western philosophy, such East/West dialogues are severely limited in scope and serve to reify the centrality of Europe in cross-cultural philosophical production.

Similarly, those philosophers who do what is called *World philosophy* or *Global philosophy* often also tend to focus on Asian and European traditions. While unity may be one possible outcome of the *New Dialogic*, it is not the goal. The *New Dialogic* is an orientation which shares some of the goals of those philosophers arguing for *Intercultural* philosophy regarding the need to bring cultures into dialogue within philosophy.⁷ The founders of *Polyglog*, an International forum for Intercultural philosophy have defined it thus: “We understand intercultural philosophy as the endeavor to give expression to the many voices of philosophy in their respective cultural contexts and thereby to generate a shared, fruitful discussion granting equal rights to all. In Intercultural philosophy we see above all a new orientation and new practice of philosophy—of a philosophy that requires an attitude of mutual respect, listening, and learning.”⁸ My coining of the term, *New Dialogic*, has a similar purpose except that while some proponents of Intercultural philosophy seek to establish a special field of Intercultural philosophy or cross-cultural philosophy or else to simply encourage cross-cultural dialogue within the discipline (see Wimmer 1996), I seek to use the methodology of the dialogic to restructure the existing discipline of philosophy in such a way that it prevents intellectual ghettoization of Southern philosophical productions.⁹

Whereas these other projects have as their aim the creation of pluralist philosophical projects that critique the Eurocentrism of mainstream philosophy, I seek not just to critique but to disrupt mainstream philosophy. The focus of the *New Dialogic* is not the West, the North, Europe, nor mainstream philosophy. The *New Dialogic* calls for the creation of new philosophy through the critical insistence on South-South dialogues that shift the discursive center. As such, it both initiates and requires a breaking down of current disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries. Motivated as it is by a richer and more extensive pursuit of wisdom, this new approach will hold no definitions or constraints sacred. All will be open to question and all limiting devices will be retained only insofar as they aid the larger goal of enriching the study of philosophy, where philosophy is defined as the asking of endless questions in the pursuit of wisdom. Thus, dialogues will not be constrained by divisions between Analytic versus Continental, or Western versus non-Western schools of philosophy, nor will they be limited by a need to find transcultural universals.

In terms of goals, the *New Dialogic* is motivated by efforts to locate dialogic nodes of confluence which encourage engagement on questions of value to humanity as a whole without being constrained by a search for static unifying principles. Dialogue promotes and deepens critique and a focus on the dialogic will allow us to get past the self-limiting, self-referential nature of mainstream philosophy and to reconsider old questions about universality and particularism, culture and philosophy, language and meaning which arise both out of specific non-Western and transcultural contexts. While it is essential to maintaining the integrity of any given debate by welcoming arguments and criticisms from any and all traditions, these new dialogues may or may not include dialogues with Western philosophy and will need to explicitly avoid historical tendencies to seek legitimacy by appealing to Europe. Legitimacy, should a philosopher seek it, must come from any and all philosophers engaged in the topic at hand. A thoroughgoing pursuit of wisdom would mean that no subject

would be considered to have been seriously discussed in the absence of intense cross-cultural critique and counter-critique.

Using this *New Dialogic* has many benefits both for philosophy as an impoverished discipline and for the 21st century world we live in, characterized as it is by numerous anti-humanitarian fractures. Philosophy should allow us to ask important and deeply fundamental questions about the meanings of our lives. It should take as its task the difficult but necessary critique of our cultural traditions and our political assumptions. It should be cognizant of and evaluative of its cultural, historical and geographical situatedness. Only if it is all these things can it hope to be of some service to those more pragmatic disciplines and activities designed to directly address social injustice and inequality in its various manifestations worldwide. Only if philosophers are willing to ask the important questions can we ever hope to obtain progress in our understanding of the world and the beings who inhabit it.

While many of the proponents of Comparative, World, or Intercultural philosophy may be looking to find new answers through cross-cultural dialogue, the *New Dialogic* seeks also to consider new possibilities regarding what types of questions are philosophical i.e. must they be definable as metaphysical, ethical, or epistemological? We can not determine the important questions by looking only within the confines of one culture, one epistemic frame. By shifting the focus from monologues to dialogues, and by shifting the geography of philosophy, the *New Dialogic* will eliminate the oppressive and limiting ways in which racialized hierarchies of knowledge have defined the discipline and conditioned non-Western access to and influence on it. In the same way that philosopher Paget Henry seeks in *Caliban's Reason* (2000) to identify philosophy in places where it has been overlooked and philosophers like Lewis Gordon and the Caribbean Philosophical Association have sought to "shift the geography of reason" (Gordon 2006; also "Words from the President" in this issue), the *New Dialogic* seeks to move the center of the discourse Ngugi-style; to de-focus Europe in favor of other more interesting

centers of thought (Ngugi wa Tiong'o 1993). Why not center philosophy in the Caribbean? Representatives from cultures all over the world are already here.

The type of dialogues I am recommending are related to but different from the type of dialogues suggested by Black and Caribbean philosophers like Outlaw (1996), Gordon (1997a), and Henry (2000). While they too have called for a dialogue between African and African American or Afro-Caribbean philosophies their call has been motivated by a desire to create a "gathering notion" or a unity of Black or African-descended thinkers into a larger complex of Africana philosophy. As such, African American philosophers are motivated to examine African philosophy for "African roots" of their own thought or for the purpose of creating a more unified diasporic discussion of race. The *New Dialogic* is not constrained by such aims. In 1996, Lucius Outlaw pointed out the lack of shared discussion between African and African American philosophers. He wrote, "Until quite recently there was a noticeable aspect to the work of professionally-trained African American philosophers: much of it had been conducted with little or no knowledge of or attention to either the histories or the forms of philosophical activity on the African continent or elsewhere in the African Diaspora" (1996:83). Outlaw saw this as a problem primarily because he was and is seeking the establishment of an "Africana philosophy "conditioned by a critically informed sense of shared identities, shared histories [and]...shared agendas" (1996:83). Such unifying creations as "Africana philosophy" are only one possible result of engaging in a *New Dialogic*. Dialogues need not lead to the identification of similarities or family resemblances. Dialogue may also lead to the instigation of meaningful differences, to the instigation of a deeper level of mutual critique and interrogation. Dialogues initiated with the express purpose of creating unifying discourses will tend to ignore or disregard differences. In this way, then opportunities for receiving input by fellow black colleagues whose critiques are not heavily polluted by anti-black, racist, colonialist or justificatory motives are missed.

Paget Henry pointed out early on that “within [the intellectual tradition that emerged in the colonial period] there could be no dialogue between African and European philosophers” because “the former were slaves and the latter were slave masters” (2000:35). Henry argues that because of the “complete disenfranchising of African philosophy” a pattern of no dialogue developed. I agree with Henry’s assessment that this pattern of no dialogue “creates artificial blockages and inert spaces on the Caribbean philosophical imagination” (2000:35). But unlike Henry, I am not interested either in African philosophy for its symbolic and literal disruption of European notions of rational superiority nor am I interested primarily in its role as an “African root” of Caribbean philosophy. Regardless of and in addition to its relationship to European philosophies of domination or emerging African American and Afro-Caribbean philosophical discourses, African philosophy is important in and of itself—as are African American, Asian, Latin, and Native American philosophies. While it is true that Caribbean philosophy, because of its historical and cultural situatedness, has a vested interest in exploring and uniting the insights of the cultures to which it has ancestral, cultural, or political links, we must not limit our dialogues to the search for roots, forebears, ancestors, or political and cultural ties even if these motives are intellectually useful ones.

The Value of the *New Dialogic*

1. MAKING CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY TRULY CROSS-CULTURAL

Current so-called cross-cultural philosophy is not indeed cross-cultural. It focuses instead on a dialogue between “East” and “West” where these two broad geographical categories have been defined by European and Euro-descended peoples based on their own experiences. For example, Asia is geographically east of Europe when you situate yourself in Europe and thus is designated “The East.” If one were to situate oneself in the Americas, as an Indigenous American, one might see Europe as “The East.”

Where you set the center determines what gets called east or west. So the so-called cross-cultural philosophy currently being done is marred initially by a geographical bias which translates into an ethnocentric rationalism which seeks to understand the East in terms of the West. In addition, these so-called East/West dialogues do not engage all cultures but only those deemed significant by the West. Thus East and South Asian philosophies are engaged by Euro-American philosophers as the “East” while African, Native American, and Latin American, philosophies are not. Cross-cultural philosophy as currently practiced only crosses certain boundaries and thus behaves as if the rest of the world is bereft of philosophy worth engaging. Africa is not east of Europe. Neither are the Americas. Which body of water or land mass must we cross in order to do cross-cultural philosophy? I argue that we must cross them all. We must criss-cross the globe in search of wisdom lest we become comfortable assuming any one culture is the only source of it. The creation of a *New Dialogic* will necessarily diversify and complicate existing East/West debates. Currently there is a tendency among philosophers in many non-European fields to spend more energy referencing and dialoguing with Western philosophy than with one another. African, African American, and Native American philosophers have all been guilty of comparing their projects to European projects but not to each other. Thus, as Lucius Outlaw has pointed out, the work of African American philosophers has been handicapped by the fact that “for the most part this work [it] is conducted with little or no knowledge of or attention to the history of philosophical activity on the African continent or elsewhere in the African Diaspora” (Outlaw 1997:71).

2. ABANDONING EFFORTS TO LEGITIMIZE NON-WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

In order to shift the focus from an East/West dichotomy, we need to do more than become more inclusive in terms of who we allow to join the debate. We also need to shift the current assumptions about who is in the position to grant or deny legitimacy to

new fields of philosophy. Both African and Native American philosophy is marred by what I call *perverse preoccupations* with proving to mainstream (read Western) philosophers that the wisdom traditions of these non-European cultures could also qualify as philosophy. We need to begin to be more critical of this need which Southern philosophers feel to prove ourselves. The fact that European philosophers and European cultures in general have a long history of discrediting and de-legitimizing non-European cultures does not mean that we, as non-European philosophers need to convince them of the error of their ways.¹⁰ Currently many philosophers proposing the existence of non-European philosophical traditions feel compelled to explain these traditions in relationship to European traditions. They feel the need to find similar histories, similar trajectories of thought. This compulsion to legitimate has stifled the development of these new fields of philosophy by forcing a fictitious European norm into their genealogies. The *New Dialogic* would not privilege the wisdom traditions of any one culture over another, it would not replicate existing power structures and the resultant intellectual biases they provoke. It would not take the history of ideas that any one culture claims is universal as a starting point. And thus it would not be necessary to evaluate the wisdom traditions of Southern cultures in terms of the standards of Northern cultures which have deemed themselves superior.

3. GETTING PAST THE ANALYTIC/CONTINENTAL DICHOTOMY.

Modern mainstream philosophy is now dominated by two schools of thought—the Analytic and the Continental. This bifurcated history has had a significant impact on the nature of modern philosophical practice. The professionalization of the discipline combined with the canonization of a particular history of the discipline has caused some mainstream philosophers to abandon larger questions in favor of questions designed to fortify the primacy of one school over another. Similarly, some African philosophers have felt the need to situate their works in African philosophy within one of these schools. Such a narrow set

of choices can hardly help to promote a true dialogue. The *New Dialogic* would not require adherence to nor preference for either of these schools and would encourage critique of any rigidities which followed from such efforts by other thinkers.

4. NEW QUESTIONS

The creation of a *New Dialogic* will promote the asking of new questions, new considerations, and will inspire the formulation of new branches of philosophy. Getting beyond the East/West dichotomy, the Analytic/Continental dichotomy and freeing ourselves from a commitment to a particular cultural history of the discipline will free us to pose new questions which have arisen out of other cultures and geographies.

5. NEW GOALS

The creation of new questions in philosophy will be possible in part because opening up the field to dialogues across cultures will necessarily require a reconsideration of the goals of philosophy. Many philosophers in African and Native American cultures, for example, believe that philosophy should have as its goal social change. In many Native American wisdom traditions, reflection upon wisdom is distilled for use in making decisions which determine the welfare of future generations. What goals might Caribbean philosophers see for the discipline?

6. INCREASED RIGOR

One of the consequences of the lifting of restrictions imposed by a narrow monocultural focus will be the creation of an expansive, more critical pursuit of wisdom. Arguments which must be defended against a larger and more diverse audience of interlocutors will have to be more rigorous. If you know you are going to be questioned by more than your cronies you have to prepare a bit more. If you have no idea what kinds of questions you will be asked, if there are no hard and fast restriction on what kinds of questions will be asked of you then you will really have to know what you are talking about. The parochialism of modern Western philosophy lacks the rigor it could have were its professionals

subjected to true criticism and questioning. A *New Dialogic* would provide such an environment of rigorous questioning. The ever-larger communities of philosophical interlocutors such a dialogic will engender, will force philosophers to be willing to continually re-think and revise their positions, arguments, and terms.

7. EMBRACING ORALITY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Another benefit of emphasizing dialogues is the expansion of the discipline which will result from a de-emphasis on literary production as the only vehicle and/or sign of philosophical production. Numerous cultures throughout the world have strong oral traditions, aspects of which include critical and interrogative discussions of abstract topics and general principles. The focus in the West on the literary productions of individual elite men has made it difficult for the wisdom traditions of oral-based cultures to become recognized as philosophy. Professional philosophers in African, African American and Native American philosophy have felt constrained by the need to search for written evidence of philosophical practice in their cultures. Such limitations have also negatively impacted efforts to include women's voices in the tradition since historically in many cultures women were denied access to education and were not included in the historical or intellectual record of many societies. Similarly, for groups of people whose group identities are important aspects of their lived experience, whether as a result of colonialist, nationalist, racial or gender ascription, or traditional, cultural or political identities, a focus narrowly on the thought of isolated individuals may not be the best way to pursue wisdom. A focus on intersubjectivity over intrasubjectivity will open up the discipline to the infusion of a multitude of critical approaches to wisdom seeking.

The Case of Caribbean Philosophy: Learning Lessons

The formulation of the field of Caribbean philosophy can be assisted by the employment of the *New Dialogic* as well as add to it. At this stage, when definitions are being sought and orientations and genealogies are being constructed, I would like to suggest that

it will be important for Caribbean philosophers to learn from their African, Native, and Latin American colleagues. The temptation and tendency is to look to mainstream philosophy as defined by Northerners for models of philosophical discourse. But the *New Dialogic* would caution against such a move and would invite instead that such philosophers learn not from those philosophers who would question the very legitimacy of the entire project but from those philosophers who have already chartered similar territory. One way to generate dialogues between the nascent field of Caribbean philosophy and other Southern philosophies is to consider lessons learned. Looking at lessons learned is also one way to generate dialogues between Caribbean philosophy and other Southern philosophies. Once Caribbean philosophy is established, it will be important for other dialogues to be generated between Caribbean and African, Afro-US and Latin American philosophies. I have enumerated a list of lessons which Caribbean philosophy can learn from work done in African, Black, and Native American philosophies:

1. Among the lessons that Caribbean philosophy can learn from African and Native American philosophy is the need to avoid perverse dialogues.¹¹ Perverse dialogues exist in many of the early formulations of new philosophical traditions by non-Western peoples. These perverse dialogues are inspired by a desire on the part of Native American and African philosophers to prove to the world that they too are capable of philosophy. These efforts may also include critiques of former Western definitions of philosophy that are exclusionary in an effort to argue that their inclusion is warranted.

I have coined the terms 'perverse dialogues' and 'perverse preoccupation' to refer to a tendency on the part of philosophers in Africa, as well as in other countries and communities deemed 'developing' or 'Third World' to preoccupy themselves with the West. Such preoccupation takes many forms. As such, perverse debates tend to:

1) center and privilege European/Western cultures and intellectual productions, 2) seek to define African (and other non-Western) philosophies in reaction to or in defense against pre-existing representations of the developing world/Third World/the colonized/Africa/Blackness, etc. 3) give credence to racist questions and assumptions by devoting serious scholarship and discussion to addressing them when in fact they should be dismissed as illegitimate in origin.

In the case of African philosophy, the pervasiveness of perversity was played out by members of the Professional School (early Appiah 1989, Bodunrin 1985, Hountondji 1983, and Wiredu 1980), who sought to disprove Western stereotypes that: 1) African thought is prelogical, irrational, and non-scientific, 2) African culture is particular, subjective, and not universalizable and, thus, 3) that Africans have no heritage of philosophical thought and are not capable of philosophy. Their preoccupation with these stereotypes has meant that members of the Professional School have sought to minimize the distinctions between African and Western philosophies. In a similar but inverted way, members of the Ethnophilosophy school of African philosophy (Tempels 1959; Mbiti 1970; Griaule 1965) sought to maximize the distinctions between African and Western philosophies by claiming that Africans were more emotive, intuitive, and artistic and less rational, logical, and scientific than European thinkers and that this profound difference is what made African philosophy uniquely African. Both approaches took as their starting point Western stereotypes and representations of Africa, and a definition of the discipline predicated on the exclusion of Africans from it. Both projects were engaged in what Masolo (1994:124-8) has called the “rationality debate” in which the question of the possibility of African rationality is taken seriously. To take such a question

seriously is perverse.

Caribbean philosophers can learn from the path that African philosophers have taken. They can refuse to engage in dialogues designed to prove that Caribbean philosophy exists or that Caribbean peoples are rational, logical, or have written traditions critical enough to qualify as philosophy. They can also resist the temptation to define the uniqueness and authenticity of Caribbean philosophy in terms of an oppositional difference from Western philosophy. Most of the early literature on African philosophy was concerned with the questions “Is there an African Philosophy?” and “How should African Philosophy be defined?” See, for example the works of Odera Oruka (1975), Innocent Onyewuenyi (1976), Theophilus Okere (1983), Cheikh Diop (1989), Paulin J. Hountondji (1983), Polycarp Ikuenobe (1997), Safro Kwame (1995), among others. African philosophers have learned from the rationality debate by engaging in it but Caribbean philosophers can learn from African philosophy rather than repeat the same steps. Does Caribbean philosophy exist? Is it possible? We need not consider such questions. Learning how not to engage in perverse dialogues is just one example of how an engagement with African philosophers can benefit Caribbean philosophers and the *New Dialogic* more generally.

2. The importance of avoiding the mere importation of or application of Western philosophical methods and definitions into the Caribbean context (e.g. Hegelian analyses of Caribbean culture, Caribbean phenomenology, deconstruction, pragmatism, etc.) can be learned from Native American philosophers who have argued that Native American philosophy exists outside Western definitions of philosophical thought (see Deloria 1997; Forbes 1992; Cordova 1996).
3. The importance of avoiding the use of “West vs. the Rest”

dichotomies that define other philosophies as the opposite of Western philosophies in order to provide uniqueness can be learned both by a critical reading of the above-mentioned Native American works which advocated a radically unique Native American intellectual tradition and from a critical evaluation of the Ethnophilosophical and Cultural schools of philosophy in African philosophy (see, for example, Ikuenobe 1997).

4. The importance of considering orality as a valid form of philosophical production can be learned from a review of African works in Sage philosophy and Cultural philosophy.¹²
5. The importance of interrogating the assumption that elite individuals (usually men) engaged in intra-subjective thought are the only valid sources of philosophy can be facilitated by a review of some of the claims of Native American philosophers regarding the value of inter-subjective reasoning (see Hester and McPherson 1997).
6. The importance of considering what I refer to as “problems of conquest” by recognizing the ways in which the physical, cultural, and intellectual conquest of the Americas and Africa by Europe has had on the intellectual production by post-conquest, post-slavery, and postcolonial subjects.¹³ Caribbean philosophers can consider the way such problems have influenced Native American, Black, and African formulations of cultural identities and philosophies. The importance of recognizing these effects while still being able to write beyond simply a response to the conquest; of keeping in mind how they influence our thinking and the reception of our work will be necessary.
7. The importance of considering what I refer to as “problems of identity” which condition our intellectual production can be learned from the debates on “Who counts as an Indian” which have preoccupied Native American scholars

both in philosophy (see, for example, Viola Cordova's work on this subject (1996; 2004a)) and in other fields.¹⁴ Answering the question who and/or what counts as Caribbean will be more complicated than these earlier discussions but it will be informed by many of the same historical considerations.

8. The importance of addressing problems of language (e.g. should Caribbean philosophy be done in Caribbean languages? Should Caribbean philosophy be done in Creole? In colonial languages? What problems do languages create?) can be aided by a review of debates in African philosophy on the issue of tribal versus lingua franca (Kswahili) versus colonial languages (see Presbey, et al. 2002), as well as by discussions about the embedded character of philosophy in language by Native American philosophers like Lee Hester (2004).¹⁵
9. The importance of addressing the false dichotomy of "universality vs. cultural particularism" and the way such correlations can color work in Caribbean philosophy can be learned by a critical examination of the way in which such assumptions were internalized by some African philosophers such as Wiredu (1980), Bodunrin (1985), Hountondji (1983) and others in the Professional School in their efforts to show that African philosophy was universal by divorcing it from any uniquely African cultural content in accordance with the assumption that philosophy is universal because it lacks reference to particular cultures.¹⁶ The implicit (and sometimes stated) belief in a primitive/savage/irrational/Native vs. universal/modern/rational/European dichotomy upon which such work is based, when made explicit and critically evaluated has important repercussions for the formulation of Caribbean philosophies with cultural bases. Such discussions force us to ask important questions about whose cultures, whose ideas, if any, can be deemed universal and whether

universality is something we should seek.

10. The importance of recognizing the way in which racial ascriptions affect the intellectual work by racialized peoples can be learned from the rich discussions on the ontology of race begun by African American philosophers of race such as Charles Mills (1997; 1998), Naomi Zack (1993; 1995; 1998), Lewis Gordon (1997a; 1997b), Tommy Lott (1999), Cornel West (1993), Angela Davis (1983), Lucius Outlaw (1996), and Joy James (1996).¹⁷ Discussions on racial realism vs. racial elitism/social constructionism will be particularly relevant to the Caribbean context. Caribbean philosophers may want to build on the work on slavery, segregation, persistence of structures of racism, reparations and related analyses of race and class which has been produced by African American philosophers such as Boxhill (1992; 2001), McGary (1999; McGary and Lawson 1992), and Davis (1983), among others.
11. The importance of addressing issues of gender and sexuality can be learned from the work produced on Black feminist thought and Caribbean feminist thought by such writers as Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Audre Lorde (1984; 1985; 1988) and June Jordan (1995; 1998). Caribbean philosophers can also inform their work by reading Native American feminists such as Paula Gunn Allen (1992) and Bea Medicine (*Medicine and Awiakta* 1993), among other feminist intellectuals of color.
12. The necessity of looking at work on traditional cultures of origin can be realized by a study of some of the philosophical work in African and Native American metaphysics: in particular work on intimate ontologies (Onyewuenyi 1976); and on the holism/interconnectedness of all living beings (Deloria (2003), Cordova (1996; 2004a; 2004b)); Indigenous epistemologies which interrogate the notion of discrete subjects; Native American cosmologies in which creator/God and earth are female; and work on African

religious beliefs (such as Yoruba and Dogon) which form the foundation for syncretic traditions in the Caribbean (such as Vodun, Santeria, Revivalism, Pokomania, etc) can be analyzed.

The Ultimate Goal: Generating Dialogue

Looking at lessons learned is one example of a way to generate dialogues between Caribbean philosophy and other non-Western philosophies. But it is only one possibility. Caribbean philosophy can also complicate and interrogate the assumptions of other Southern philosophies. For example, Caribbean philosophers can complicate North American philosophies of race by looking at hybridity and the fluidity of racial categories in the Caribbean, examining race/class correlations in Caribbean cultures and adding analyses of creolization, and mestizaje that extend these discussions and critique them.

Caribbean philosophy can be used to question and critique Native American, Asian and African philosophy or it can inform the creation of intellectual coalitions designed to consider shared goals and to jointly address pressing world problems. For example, all Southern philosophies are uniquely positioned to critique Northern/Western/dominant cultures and philosophies in ways which could benefit all the unwilling heirs of European imperialism and its intellectual products

Caribbean philosophy could be a site for the convergence of Southern philosophies, characterized as it is by a polyglot of cultures, languages, and wisdom traditions. Caribbean philosophers could decide to bring together philosophers of various ethnic and geographical origins for the purpose of helping to formulate a Caribbean philosophy that is representative of its true cultural diversity and syncretic nature and in this way, Caribbean philosophy could provide an important impetus for the creation of truly cross-cultural philosophies. The Caribbean could help to give birth to the *New Dialogic* and thus be instrumental in saving philosophy from its current spiral into irrelevance and parochialism.

The promise of Caribbean philosophy then lies in the contribution it makes to the creation of larger, richer, more meaningful dialogues valuable both to Caribbean peoples in particular and to Southern peoples generally.

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Notes

- ¹ Delivered at the 2nd Annual Caribbean Philosophy Association Meeting, San Juan, Puerto Rico, June 2005. I would like to thank Lewis Gordon and Paget Henry for their support of my participation in the CPA and I would like to thank Nelson Maldonado-Torres for his support, encouragement, and editing finesse on this project.
- ² I have coined this term to refer to a particular philosophical method and orientation that I am proposing. This article draws from a larger work I am currently completing entitled *The New Dialogic in Philosophy*.
- ³ Here I am using the terms North/South and East/West to refer to the political and economic divisions of the world's countries and cultures. Palestinian scholar Edward Said (1978) was one of the first to problematize the terms East and West and their perpetuation of an Eurocentrism which misrepresented Asia and the Arab countries. For later discussions of orientalism see Samir Amin (1989) and Lisa Lowe (1991). The terms First World/Third World were used interchangeably with East/West to denote not geographical location but economic power. I will be using the rather generic term, "Western philosophy" throughout the text to refer to the philosophical production of Europe and the Anglo-American tradition in the United States. Although the critique is sometimes made that Western philosophy is diverse and cannot be talked about generally, I would respond by making the same argument Nigerian philosopher Sophie Oluwole does with regard to the use of the term 'Western philosophy.' Although use of this term necessitates a collapsing of diverse schools of thought into one large grouping, this grouping does have an internal cohesion that justifies the use of the term. Oluwole writes: "Every literary convention has some unwritten norms which generally serve as guides to the thinkers and authors working under its influence...[it] evolves when such conventions become established principles of style...This, to my mind, is precisely the sense in which works in Physics, Chemistry, Economics, and Religion produced by Western authors adequately constitute a Western tradition of thought. All works of philosophers from the West...exhibit basic features of this literary heritage hence the adequacy of classifying them all as Western philosophy" (Oluwole 1992). I might also add that as I am grouping all African and all Native American nations into large continental groupings, it makes sense to do the same with the less diverse group of European/British peoples.

- ⁴ Much has been written in the last 50 years regarding the strong evidence of African cultural retentions in the Caribbean. Numerous studies in history, sociology, anthropology, literature, and sociology have been done documenting the African origins of Caribbean traditions, language, and beliefs. Professor Mervyn Alleyne (1988) found evidence of African cultural continuities in dance, religion, language and metaphysical beliefs. The Caribbean may indeed be considered the geographical region of the Western hemisphere where the largest number and the most authentic examples of Africanisms exist.
- ⁵ Arguments for the need for South-South dialogues have been made by other scholars outside of Caribbean, African, African American or Native American philosophy, most often within political, economic and Ethnic Studies intellectual projects (see Furtado 2004). Paget Henry (2000) has already recognized this need by including a discussion of African philosophy in his formulation of the field.
- ⁶ University of Hawaii Press Website. Retrieved March 27, 2006 (<http://www.uhpress.hawaii.edu/journals/pew/>).
- ⁷ For example, the arguments of Wimmer for a polylog resemble my own arguments for a *New Dialogic*. He writes, "I think there is...an alternative: it consists in a procedure, which is no longer merely comparative, or dia-logical, but rather polylogical." Questions of philosophy--questions concerning the fundamental structures of reality, the knowledgeability, the validity of norms--have to be discussed in such a way that a solution is not propagated unless a polylogue between as many traditions as possible has taken place. This presupposes the relativity of concepts and methods, and it implies a non-centric view to the history of human thinking. At the very beginning there can be formulated a negative rule: never accept a philosophical thesis from authors of a single cultural tradition to be well founded" (Wimmer 1996:15).
- ⁸ *Polylog* editors say of their project "Intercultural philosophy is not thereby intended as a new theory, discipline, or school to be established." Retrieved March 27, 2006 (<http://www.polylog.org/>).
- ⁹ Other philosophers must certainly have made similar critiques about the lack of true comparative philosophy. See for example, Naqima Baitenova, who writes, "Today, unfortunately, we cannot speak about the presence of one entire world philosophy. It is connected with the fact that the history of world philosophy is investigated from the position of Eurocentrism, and what we consider as world philosophy actually is the West-European philosophy. In world

philosophy, Eastern philosophy is represented only by three blocks: classical Chinese, Indian and Arabian philosophies” (2004:75).

- ¹⁰ Both Charles Mills (1997) and Emmanuel Eze (1997) do a very good job of identifying and discussing the racist representations of non-Europeans in the texts of many of the canonical figures. It is Mill’s central thesis that race has always been central to philosophy, that indeed, anti-black racism has been central to social contractarian thought. He writes: “In philosophy, one could trace this common thread [of raced incapacity for rationality] through Locke’s speculation on the incapacities of primitive minds, David Hume’s denial that any other race but whites had created worthwhile civilization, Kant’s thoughts on the rationality differentials between blacks and whites, [and] Voltaire’s polygenetic conclusion that blacks were a distinct and less able species.” He explains how Locke, who “saw blacks as not fully human and thus as subject to a different set of normative rules,” defended slavery in his *Second Treatise* and how Hobbes offered “the savage people in many parts of America” as an example of his, by now, famous description of the pre-civilization, bestial state of nature in which life was “nasty, brutish, and short.” He also points out how, for Kant, who created a “color-coded hierarchy” of humanity, “full personhood...is actually dependent upon race” (Mills 1997:59, also quotes from pages 64-65 (Hobbes), 68 (Locke), and 71 (Kant), respectively).
- ¹¹ Further elaboration of the notion of “perverse dialogues” and the related idea of “perverse preoccupations” are part of a larger critique the author has made of African, African American and Native American discourses. These critiques were developed in the following conference papers which are currently being revised for publication: Vest, Jennifer Lisa. “Perverse and Necessary Dialogues: A Critique of Current Debates in Anglophone African Philosophy.” Presented at the James S. Coleman African Studies Center Lecture Series, UCLA, February 2001; Vest, Jennifer Lisa. “Perverse and Necessary Debates in African Philosophy.” Presented at the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies 9th Annual Conference, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, April, 2003.
- ¹² For a discussion of Sage philosophy see H. Odera Oruka (1990) and Gail Presbey (1997). For examples of cultural philosophy, see Sophie Oluwole (1989), Kwame Gyekye (Gyekye 1987), and M. Akin Makinde (1988). Makinde argues that the only thing that distinguishes Western science from Yoruba empiricism is the absence in the latter of writing. Professional school philosophers tended to argue against

orality. They made arguments linking literacy to criticism and abstract thought. They were likely influenced by early anthropological works that made similar claims. See for example the early work of Jack Goody (1998). Appiah (1989) also argues for the importance of literary presentation. Igbo philosopher Fidelis Okafor is similarly critical of the narrow way in which “professional” philosophers define philosophy. He writes: “This conception of philosophy as a scientific enterprise requiring literacy and documentation as conditions for its birth and growth immediately excludes African philosophy that is founded on traditional African worldviews, cosmologies, etc because in traditional African societies there was neither literacy nor documentation. Obviously, the conception of philosophy is very limited in scope” (Okafor 1993:96).

- ¹³ This is the author’s term and is part of a larger proposal for the creation of Academic Native American philosophy first delivered as a talk: Vest, Jennifer Lisa. “Creating Academic Native American Philosophy: Problems of Conquest, Problems of Identity, Problems of Translation.” Invited Talk, American Indian Studies Center, UCLA, March 2001. This talk has been developed into chapter One of my book *Sovereign Speak: Generating Academic Native American Philosophy*, currently being revised for possible publication in 2007.
- ¹⁴ I have elaborated the notion of “problems of identity” in Vest, Jennifer Lisa. “Creating Academic Native American Philosophy: Problems of Conquest, Problems of Identity, Problems of Translation.” Invited Talk, American Indian Studies Center, UCLA, March 2001. For discussions of American Indian Identity, see N.C. Peroff and D.R. Wildcat (2002), among others. For a discussion of the impact of identity on intellectual production, see Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1998), Angela Cavendar Wilson (Wilson 1998), Vine Deloria Jr. (1998). On the complications to Indian identity caused by whites claiming Indian identity see Ward Churchill (1992). For a discussion of white representations of Indianess see Robert F. Berkhofer (1979).
- ¹⁵ For a discussion of methodological considerations, including language in African Philosophy, see, for example, Dismas Masolo (1994)--in particular, see his chapter, “Language and Reality” for an overview of the work written on the metaphysical content of African languages. See also the discussion on language in Age Bello’s article, “Some methodological Considerations in African Philosophy” (2004). For examples of philosophy of an African language, see Alexis Kagame (1956), Kwame Gyekye (1975), and Kwasi Wiredu (1980). For a discussion of the need for a lingua franca for Africans,

see Naomi Shitemi and Mwanakombo N. Noordin (2001).

- ¹⁶ For a breakdown of the schools in African philosophy, see Oruka, H. Odera Oruka (1990), Ruch, E. A and K.C. Anyanwu (1984). For an overview of some important issues in the creation of African philosophy, see Innocent Onyewuenyi (1976), and Marie Pauline Eboh (1987). For reflections on Professional school philosophers Bodunrin, Wiredu, and Hountondji see Anthony Appiah (1989). For work by African philosophers belonging to the cultural school, see Kwame Gyekye (1987), Ulrich Lolke (1997), M. Akin Makinde (1988), John S. Mbiti (1970), Alexis Kagame (1956), Sophie Oluwole (1992), F. Eboussi Boulaga (1997), Helen Verran (2001), Kola Abimbola (2006), Odera Oruka (1975).
- ¹⁷ For an overview of work in African American philosophy generally, see John Pittman (1997), Leonard Harris (1983), Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (1995), and Victor Anderson (1995).