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(RE)THINKING CARIBBEAN CULTURE I

Introduction

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Welcome to the first issue of SHIBBOLETHS, an open access, peer-reviewed journal devoted to exploring all aspects of philosophy and theory.

Though not exclusively Caribbean in focus, attempts to theorise the Caribbean, theories by Caribbean thinkers, and efforts to situate Caribbean thought within a wider socio-historical and intellectual context inevitably form an important part of what we do, given the roots of many of us involved in this project. For this reason, we are pleased to devote our first volume (three issues) to the theme of (Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture, that is, to an exploration of the major ways in which Caribbean culture has thus far been theorised and how it might in turn, where necessary, be rethought.

The first issue, like the second, consists of papers initially presented at the (Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture conference held by the Faculty of Humanities and Education of the Cave Hill campus of the University of the West Indies in June 2001 and subsequently revised for publication. To get a sense of the subject matter and scope of the conference and, by extension, the first volume of this journal, I thought it might be useful to revisit the call for papers issued by the Organising Committee¹ at that time:

Believing . . . that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of a meaning. (Clifford Geertz The Interpretation of Cultures)

'Caribbean culture' is a term bandied about both within and without academe with ever increasing frequency. At the bidding of the Vice Chancellor, the University of the West Indies has recently undertaken a so-called 'Cultural Studies Initiative.' But what exactly do we understand by terms such as 'culture' or 'cultural studies' or 'Caribbean'? How can we effectively make use of concepts such as 'race' or 'gender' or 'class' or 'diaspora' or 'nation-state' or the ubiquitous 'identity,' to cite just a few examples, if we are not clear in our own minds what exactly these mean for us in the region?

(Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture is an attempt to answer such questions by specifying and assessing the major ways in which Caribbean culture in its various manifestations has historically been conceptualised. Given that much research on the Caribbean had long been mainly empirical in thrust, a conference devoted to the precise theoretical frameworks which inform the study of particular aspects of Caribbean culture (its arts, its history, its language, etc.) is arguably both timely and necessary. The old adage that the answers one gets depend on the nature of the

¹The Organising Committee consisted of Richard Clarke (Literature, Literary and Cultural Theory), Kean Gibson (Linguistics), Anthea Morrison (Modern Languages), Aviston Downes (History), Majid Amini (Philosophy), and Sherry Asgill (student representative).

questions posed is one that has arguably not been sufficiently explored in the region up to now. Accordingly, one of the most important aims of the conference is to explore, where particular orthodoxies may arguably have become enshrined, stale or even disproved, alternative perspectives from which Caribbean culture might or ought to be rethought.

Suggested topics include, but are not limited to:

- the conceptualisation of key terms such as 'race,' 'racism,' 'gender,' 'misogyny,' 'nationhood,' 'Africanness,' 'Europeanness,' etc.;
- the relationship between the literary text, the world, the author and / or the reader;
- 'nation language,' 'creolisation' and similar linguistic concepts;
- the debate over whether logic can ever be culturally-specific;
- the 'objectivity' and 'scientific' status of histories of the Caribbean;
- conceptions of the Caribbean social formation; and
- theories of Caribbean polity.

Although we are particularly interested in papers that focus on the precise theoretical frameworks which inform the study of particular aspects of Caribbean culture, we are also open to theoretically 'self-aware' contributions that seek to apply particular theoretical approaches in the form of close readings of literary or other texts, discussions of specific historical controversies, and so on.

The response to this call for papers was overwhelming to the point where the Organising Committee struggled to cope with the demand to take part. The size of the conference mushroomed far beyond our original expectations. Many fine papers were presented, each offering a unique and valuable perspective on the suggested and related topics. This stimulated in turn a free and frank exchange of ideas articulated from a variety of points of view.

I know that the other members of the conference Organising Committee join me in expressing our sincere gratitude to all who participated in the conference. We thank, too, the then Heads of the Department of Language, Linguistics and Literature, the Department of History and Philosophy, and the School of Education as well as the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Education for their unstinting and generous support, financial and / or otherwise. We extend special thanks as well to the many members of the academic and administrative staff of the Faculty of Humanities and Education, too numerous to mention, without whose untiring efforts the conference would not have been the success it was. (One name that simply must be singled out in this regard, however, is that of Mrs. Grace Franklin who was at that time the Administrative Assistant: Special Projects in the office of the Faculty of Humanities and Education. Her efficiency and invariably pleasant disposition was not only exemplary to us all but has been very much missed since her retirement.) Last but not least, we are very grateful for the extremely generous financial support furnished by the Ford Foundation without which the conference would not have been possible on the scale or in the form which it eventually took.

The SHIBBOLETHS editorial committee is grateful to the many participants who took the time to submit revised versions of their presentations for our consideration. Realising that it would be impossible to publish them all, we settled on a single criterion: we opted for those papers which attempted in some way to theorise Caribbean culture in general, or particular aspects thereof, and put to one side those, as fine as they might be, which sought to undertake analyses of a more practical nature (e.g. of literary texts, linguistic patterns, historical events, and so on). In putting this volume together, we have accordingly had a very difficult time, to say the least, culling

only a handful from the many fine submissions which we received. We are grateful, in this regard, to the many anonymous reviewers who took time out of their busy schedules to read and comment on the numerous papers received and whose considered responses have helped guide the decisions of the editorial committee.

If you would like to comment on particular essays, reviews or any issues that may arise in the pages of this journal, or if you would like to participate in an ongoing discussion of Theory in general, please join the Shibboleths on-line discussion forum by filling in your e-mail address in the box provided on our homepage (www.shibboleths.net) or clicking on the link found on the right side of the same page.