

## Caribbean Philosophy and Me: Autobiographical Reflections

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*This paper is an account of the author's emergence as an Afro-Caribbean philosopher, although formally trained and still working in the discipline of sociology. In order to complete this account, I made use of an Akan theory of the self and the circular path of its development, in order to integrate the details of the influences, major phases, and changes leading to my emergence as a Caribbean philosopher, as well as some of the academic challenges to the field of Caribbean philosophy as a whole that had to be overcome.*

**Key words:** *ntesie, okra, sunsum*; Adinkra signs; multiple personas; Antigua and Barbuda; Africana philosophy

Like several other well-known philosophers, I did not grow up thinking I would be a philosopher, even though there was an early attraction to the discipline. Further, my formal training was not in the field of philosophy. Rather it was in sociology. Thus, writing the text *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* was a bit of a surprise for me, as I was unsure where inside me it was coming from. Until I started writing it, such a work was not a creation that I saw in my future as a sociologist. But an interesting set of circumstances conspired to make it all possible. So let us turn to the beginning and look at the first set of these circumstances.

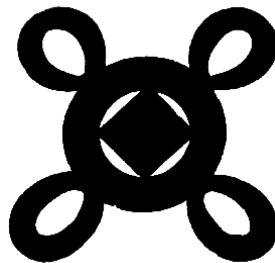
I was born in April of 1946 on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, but after only six months, my parents, who were very good Methodists, returned to their homeland of Antigua and Barbuda. As a result, I grew up on the island of Antigua, and attended the Faith and Hope High School. In 1956, my father, a policeman, was transferred, this time to the island of Tortola, where we lived for four years, and I attended the Virgin Islands Secondary School. At this school, I was introduced to physics and chemistry by a very capable science teacher from Guyana, Mr. Allen. Returning to Antigua in 1960, I entered the Antigua Grammar School in the fourth form, where I continued to cultivate my growing interest in science. Over the next three years, I completed my Ordinary and Advance level exams, which were needed for entry into the University of the West Indies. I applied to this university, but did not get in. However, I was accepted by the City University of New York, and migrated to the U.S. in 1964 with the intention of becoming a physicist. It was there that the fields of physics, sociology, and philosophy really opened before me. I dove into these three fields with gusto and was transformed in ways that only much later I was able to understand. In these later reflections on my journey to philosophy, I was very effectively aided by an African theory of the human self—in particular, the theory of the Akan of Ghana. So let me briefly interrupt my narrative and sketch this theory for you.

### 1 A Theoretical Prelude

The Akan theory of the human self is most explicitly presented in the “Adinkra signs,” a set of images that includes drawings of the human self in its changing relations with its divine ground. This view

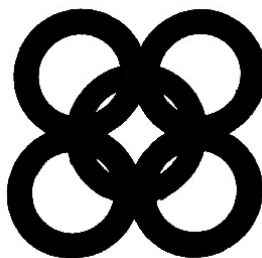
divides the human being into three basic parts: the body (*bonan*), the ego (*sunsum*), and the soul (*okra*). These three dimensions of our existence are usually in changing dynamic relations with each other as we go through the stages from child to adult to elderly person.

To understand the importance and significance of the tensions between these three aspects of the self, I must make clear that in the Akan philosophical tradition the *sunsum* or ego is not naturally a single and well-integrated subjective formation. On the contrary, the normal human subject is conceived as a psyche with multiple personas, which quite often do not recognize each other and thus find themselves in sustained conflicts. Each of these personas is rooted in a distinct sense of “I” which is the result of the co-creative work of the ego, with the *okra* very much in the background during these earlier stages of self-formation.



*Sunsum*: A portrait of the ego with circles as its multiple personas, one of which is dominant, and the *okra* as the square in the center or heart of the psyche

As a result, these multiple senses of “I” are each located at distinct existential addresses by the self-formative work of their ego. That is, each of these senses of “I” is inserted in different conceptions of the world and is located at different distances from the other personas of the psyche and also at different distances from the *okra*. These different internal existential addresses and the distances between them are in part the result of the binary logics by which the different working egos fashion and co-create personas such as drummers, mothers, lawyers, philosophers, or poets. These binary logics are such that to choose and affirm any one of the above identities is at the same time to negate and refuse other possible identities that are perceived as the opposite of the one chosen. Further, the distances between these multiple senses of “I” are also the result of inherited ego-centeredness, which gives to each of them the inflated feeling that it is the only self, the real self, and the whole self. When our multiple personas are firmly in the grip of this belief, we are in the ego-inflated state of *kuntinkantan*.

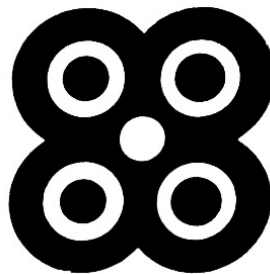


*Kuntinkantan*: the inflated state of the ego with each of its personas striving for dominance over the other and further eclipsing *okra* as center and foundation of the psyche

Quite often, the group of negated possibilities of being will include some of the other personas already forming within the psyche, and also the *okra*. When these are reinforced by the inflationary strategies of the ego, we get the reality of intense intra-subjective conflicts. These various internal distances and their related conflicts are not permanently fixed, but can and will change over the course of the individual's life. Changes in these internal distances will of course bring changes in the conscious identity and sense of self to the individual.

Indeed, the onto-ethical goal of Akan existential philosophy is the overcoming of these ego-inflated binary conflicts by making each persona more conscious of its conflicted involvements through assimilating the reflections of them in dreams and other creative work of the *okra*. In other words, the Akan approach to human subject formation recognizes the strong tendencies within our multiple personas to over-identify with our bodies, our emotions, our intellect, our parents, our children, or other aspects or contents of everyday life to the exclusion of others. In making these exclusionary over-identifications our personas become like actors who are so attached to their roles that they have forgotten who they really are. These excessive attachments lead to intra-subjective as well as inter-subjective conflicts, and, most important for the Akan, to the eclipsing and forgetting of the *okra*. However, this period of conflict and eclipsing of the *okra* is seen as a necessary phase in human self-formation, but one that should be surpassed, even though this surpassing is quite often not achieved.

The transcending and surpassing of this phase in the journey or “*akwantu*” of the self can only be achieved as the creative and self-organizing center of the psyche shifts from the binary, inflationary, and exclusionary codes of the egos of the various personas to the spiritual and more inclusive codes of the *okra*. In other words, it is the more conscious emergence of the spiritual *okra* as the organizing center in the second half of life that resolves the tensions between the various personas living at different existential addresses and competing with each other. This emergence of the *okra* and its eclipsing of the various centers of ego creativity reverses the earlier pattern of the first half of life during which ego creativity eclipsed that of the *okra*. This is the state of *ntesie*.



*Ntesie*: the state of inner integration and wisdom that comes with the emergence of the *okra*, which unifies and squares the competing circles of the earlier phases of the *sunsum*

This reversing or squaring of the circles of premature ego closure establishes these Adinkra signs within the tradition of mandala art. Together, these two movements in opposite directions establish the broad framework for the *akwantu* or journey of the human self. With these key ideas in mind let us now return to the narrative of my *akwantu* and the place of philosophy within it.



*Sankofa*: ancient Akan symbol for the self-reflective nature of philosophy as it aids the okra in its work of reconciliation and inner integration

## 2 Intimations of Philosophy in Antigua

As a youth growing up in Antigua, the earliest sense of an “I” that I can recall was a strong identification with my body and with nature. Until about ten, I experienced myself primarily through my body. I affirmed this body-centered identity through lots of physical activities—particularly swimming, running, and bike riding. At the same time, I experienced nature as friend of my body, one with which I was in communicative contact. Thus much later in life, I described myself at this earlier phase as “a budding naturalist.”

This immediate naturalism was disturbed by the regular church attendance of my parents. This exposed me to what I experienced as the strange and not quite intelligible world of Christian Methodism. The latter was just too big for my emerging naturalist “I.” The heavenly and hellish worlds of which it spoke were beyond my little grasp. Cognitively and ritualistically I took in as much as I could of the important doctrine of salvation. In spite of this meager grasp, I won many prizes in Sunday school and acted in Sunday school plays. My parents had the life of a Methodist minister all planned out for me. As a result, somewhere between eight and ten years of age, this growing Christian identity began imperceptibly to eclipse my earlier naturalist sense of self. Unknown to me, the two were constructed as irreconcilable opposites. Thus, in another period of self-reflection I described myself as a Christian. However, it was never as concrete as my earlier body-self.

As noted above, in my last two years at the Virgin Islands Secondary School in Tortola, I began the study of physics and chemistry. I took to these subjects like the proverbial fish to water. Swimming in these new epistemic waters was both spontaneous and exhilarating. The new concepts were not only graspable, but I was also able to manipulate and innovate with them. Consequently, I understood much more experientially where these scientists were coming from, and could imagine myself among them.

In 1960, I returned to Antigua. Not only was I able to continue my exploration of physics and chemistry, but also I now had a close companion and fellow traveler: my cousin, Roy Daniel. He was a much better physicist and mathematician than I was, and I joined him in the fourth form of the Antigua Grammar School. We fast became inseparable and together we explored the worlds of science. We did lots of extra experiments in the lab, and read lots of books on the lives of great scientists. Every afternoon around 4:00 we would meet and talk about things we had learned in class or the books we were reading.

One day, just before one of these afternoon conversations, something truly amazing happened to me. It was as though, unbeknownst to me, all of the specific things that I was learning about atoms,

molecules, gravity, light sound, and electro-magnetism had coalesced into a coherent picture of the world, which was very different from the one I had inherited from my Christian Methodism. While sitting and waiting for Roy, this subterranean scientific worldview that had been in formation rose to the surface of my consciousness without warning, completely superseding and replacing my Christian worldview. It was instantaneous and definitive, having the force of a religious revelation. When Roy arrived a few minutes later, I shared my experience with him. I summed it up in the following words: “It was as though God had revealed to me that there was no God,” as there was no such figure in this just-revealed scientific worldview. To my surprise and delight, Roy had earlier gone through a similar experience but had been afraid to share it with me as I was still fully inscribed in my Methodist worldview. We talked extensively about these experiences and whether or not to tell our families, who were not into science at all. We decided not to tell.

In the months that followed, the burning question for me was this: “If Christian Methodism was not the answer to the meaning of the world, then what was?” Maybe, I thought, it could be science. Thus, the implications of my experience for both science and religion moved to the center of my attention, eclipsing the Latin, English literature, geography, and other lessons that filled my class time at the Antigua Grammar School. From this point on, this creative responsibility of fashioning a vision of existence has remained with me. Although I was definitely leaning towards science, it was already clear to me that it was my interpretations of both science and religion that I was relying on to answer this crucial question. This realization was the context in which I really became conscious of philosophy and began to take a deliberate interest in it. For me, philosophy began as the adjudicator between science and religion in my efforts to answer my burning question. As I got more engaged with this search, I began privately to experience myself as a philosopher-scientist, but only on a very minor scale. At the same time, my Methodist identity was receding into the background. Also receding at this time was a poetic function to which I paid only minor attention. I would often compose poems in my sleep and write them down on awakening. Now these poems began receding into the distance where I could not reach them, until I lost contact with this faculty.

### 3 Reading My First Philosophical Text

Although I recognized the need for philosophy as an aid in interpreting and evaluating the teachings of both science and religion, I did not immediately start reading philosophy books. I was still taken with the lives of the great scientists. When I was not engaged with these books and my schoolwork, I was off swimming or riding my bike. The pre-Christian identification with my body and physical activities was still there, but now a distant third. First and foremost, I now identified with my mind and its capacity to reason. At this time, my mother did not like me going to the beach without an adult member of the family. So, quite often when I told her I was going to the library to get more physics books, I would hop on my bike and head for the beach and meet with lots of my friends who were doing the same thing. One evening I overheard my mother telling the story of one of my friends who got caught playing this little trick; she interjected with the assertion, “Paget would never do that.”

So, the next time I said that I was going to the library, I did go to the library. It was a small library in the heart of St. Johns, the capital city, and was not very far from where I lived. By this time, Roy and I had read just about all of the books on the lives of great physicists and chemists that were in the collection. As a result, I had to look elsewhere for something to read. I was not into fiction at all, as I had let that more literary/poetic side of me slip away. I wandered over to the philosophy section. My eyes alighted on A.C. Ewing’s book *Ethics*, which was in a larger series entitled “Teach

Yourself Philosophy.” It seemed like just what I needed. I sat down at a table, opened it, bypassed the chapter on Socrates, as I was immediately drawn to the chapter on Kant. I took Ewing’s book home and began the process of reading philosophy.

#### 4 Studying Philosophy at City College

With these intimations of philosophy as a youth in Antigua, it should come as no surprise that I enrolled in philosophy classes at the City College of the City University of New York. Indeed, it was there that I had my first real exposure to philosophy and to sustained dialogues with philosophers. I felt very much at home. One of the first courses that I took was on the philosophy of science with Professor Michael Levin, and my final paper was on the epistemologies of science and religion. As a result, Professor Levin became one of my strong supporters and worked hard at getting me the 1970 Frederick Sperling Award for the best student in philosophy, even though I was a sociology major.

Also important for me at that time was the class that I took with Professor Irani on eastern philosophy. Much to my surprise, I was inexplicably drawn to eastern philosophy. I left the class with Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore as major reference figures in my still quite subordinate philosophical sense of self. I continued reading all three long after the class was over. They were all classic idealist philosophers, who engaged the notion of spirit in extensive and sustained ways. The peculiar thing about reading these three was that I could not grasp and rephrase in my own words what they were saying, but at the same time I had this unshakable feeling that what they were saying was more profound than most of what I was reading and could currently grasp. So in the evenings, I would just enjoy reading them, even though I knew I would not be able to integrate them into what I would be doing the next day, week, month, or year. And for many years, that is just how they stayed—in a realm apart, as I had no concrete experience with the concept of spirit, in spite of my Methodist phase.

#### 5 Race, Sociology, and Philosophy

By the middle of my second year at City College, these philosophical issues regarding relations between science and religion began to be eclipsed by a new set of concerns: being a Black man in American society. Moving from St. Johns to New York was in reality a move from colonial Antigua to the racially colonized community of Harlem. I experienced more sharply the racial impact of colonization in Harlem. Further, arriving in the U.S. in 1964 exposed me to some of the peak moments of the African American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Until this point, my primary object of study was nature, but it was now shifting to society.

To make sense of my experiences of living in America, I began taking courses in the sociology department and joined a number of activist groups. Works by Frederick Douglass, W.E.B Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James began replacing books on the lives of great scientists. In my sociology classes, I was very taken with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim. Vital to this growing interest in sociology were three sociologists. Professor Jay Schulman was an excellent scholar of Marx, and the model of a radical Marxist activist. Professor Frieda Silvert was an outstanding Weberian. She organized many graduate and faculty reading groups, including one on Barrington Moore’s book, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, to which she invited me even though I was still an undergraduate. Professor Marlis Krueger was from Germany and an expert on the critical sociology

of the Frankfurt School. She was largely responsible for my long-standing interest in the sociology and philosophy of Jurgen Habermas. One day in class she said to me, “You should read Habermas. You think like him.” Later that week, she presented me with a copy of his *Towards a Rational Society*. I continued reading him long after the class was over and all through graduate school.

## 6 Graduate Work at Cornell University

In my last two years at City College, I felt myself transitioning from physics and chemistry to sociology. As this emerging sociologist, I intellectually returned to the Caribbean. As at City College, I was very active in the Caribbean Students Association at Cornell. Together, we brought to campus Caribbean scholars like C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney, and Lloyd Best. In my coursework, I focused on problems of Caribbean economic development and wrote my dissertation on the case of Antigua and Barbuda. This work was profoundly influenced by the theories of the Caribbean dependency school of economics, and my distinct contribution was to add a cultural dimension to their central categories of political economy. This cultural component included a small space for philosophy.

I graduated from Cornell in 1976 and began teaching at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. One of the first things I did there was to organize, with Dick Howard of the philosophy department, a graduate seminar on Habermas to which he came for a visit. I moved in 1983 from Stony Brook to the University of Virginia and from there to Brown University in 1987, where I had a joint appointment in the sociology and Africana Studies departments. In short, life as a sociologist was moving along with the usual bumps along the road. This remained the case until I became the chair of the Africana Studies department in 1992. In the course of chairing this department, something truly amazing happened to me once again. This time it was not the surfacing from the subterranean depths of a young scientific persona but the erupting of a rather mature philosophical persona.

## 7 Life as a Caribbean Philosopher

As chair of the department of Africana Studies, I had to outline to the faculty my plans for the next three years in the life of the department. By Africana Studies, we mean an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to the study of Africa and its major diasporic sites: Black America, Black Canada, Black Europe, the Caribbean, Brazil, and other Latin American countries. The major names in the history of the field include Ottobah Cugoana, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ana Julia Cooper, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Derek Walcott, and Toni Morrison. At this time, one of the major new trends in the field was the rise of African and African American philosophy. The names of Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Wiredu, Anthony Appiah, Cornel West, Lucius Outlaw, Jr., Teodros Kiros, Paulin Hountondji, and Leonard Harris were becoming widely known. As a result, I informed my faculty that the distinctive mark of my chairmanship would be the introduction of Africana philosophy to the department and to the larger university community. I was already in contact with the person I wanted to anchor this new area of study, Lewis Gordon. Three years earlier, he had graduated from Yale University’s philosophy department, with specialties in European and Africana existentialism, and was an assistant professor at Purdue University. Both President Vartan Gregorian and Dean Bryan Shepp liked the plan and approved the new line in Africana philosophy.

The first major obstacle to hiring Professor Gordon was the fact that Africana Studies at Brown was still formally a program and not a full academic department. That meant that on our own we could not make job offers on tenure-track lines. That had to be done in conjunction with a full department. Naturally, I turned to the philosophy department and offered to share the line so that together we could make a tenure-track offer to Professor Gordon. As a three-year-old PhD, his first book, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, was already out, and he had a draft of his second book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*. Thus, I was shocked and surprised when the chair of the philosophy department categorically rejected my offer. Not long after, the religious studies department expressed a strong interest in a joint hire, as they had long been seeking an existentialist.

Professor Gordon joined our department in 1995, and the plans for Africana philosophy at Brown were finally off the ground. Even with the arrival of Professor Gordon, I still did not realize the full proportions of the challenge of bringing Africana philosophy to Brown. I learned very quickly that the level of anti-Black racism in American philosophy departments was higher than in sociology departments, and that to pull this off I would have to become much more deeply involved in the life of professional philosophy in the American academy. I did not know it at the time, but taking on this task would make me into a philosopher.

To get this more concrete feel for professional philosophy, I started attending the annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association (APA) and presenting papers on the Caribbean philosophers who were major reference figures in my intellectual world. In particular, I focused on James, Fanon, and now added Gordon. In 1989, a small group of us formed the C.L.R. James Society, and began publishing the *C.L.R. James Journal*. This work was the basis for the papers I presented at the APA. Further, in 2002, we (Lewis Gordon, Clevis Headley, Charles Mills, Patrick Goodin, and me) formed the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA) at a conference in Jamaica.

The responses to my presentations on James and Fanon were rather disappointing. At this time the APA had not formally recognized African American philosophy. This non-recognition extended to Afro-Caribbean philosophy, with many scholars objecting that James and Fanon were not “professional philosophers.” At the same time that I was engaged in these debates, I began writing philosophical papers for edited volumes that Gordon and other Black philosophers were editing. In these papers, I was very much on the defensive, trying to make clear this invisible or non-existent discourse I was calling Caribbean philosophy, and suggesting that it was an integral part of the larger field of Africana philosophy with African and African American philosophy. Without being fully aware of it, I was functioning as an Afro-Caribbean philosopher, articulating the particular consciousness of existence by which Afro-Caribbean people lived. I was defending and presenting this consciousness to others, along with its claims and values, on panels with Gordon, West, Outlaw, and other rising figures in the field of Africana philosophy. However, on these occasions I still experienced myself as a sociologist, and would apologize for “moonlighting” as a philosopher.

This hesitation about speaking as a philosopher changed dramatically with the writing of *Caliban's Reason*. Intellectually mobilized by the challenges of bringing Africana philosophy to Brown and of defending my claims regarding James and Fanon as philosophers, it was as though all of the scattered readings that I had done in the field, starting with those in Antigua and at City College, began constellating themselves as an integrating whole around a distinct creative center. The wider and more integrated this process of constellation became, the more spontaneously I began speaking and writing as a philosopher. There were many poorly integrated elements in this evolving constellation—Black Marxism, sociological empiricism, spiritual ideas from Krishnamurti and Aurobindo, Caribbean poeticism, Africana existentialism from Gordon—that were finding progressively more complementary places around a still unknown center. But it was this increasing coherence and its



ability to function as an autonomous site of discursive creativity that crystalized the sense of a philosophical “I.”

*Caliban’s Reason* was framed and shaped by this growing process of integration around a new center and by my limited awareness at the time of the nature of the center around which all of this consolidation was taking place. As noted earlier, my capacities for understanding and engaging in religious and theological thinking got pushed into the background as the youthful philosopher-scientist rose to the surface. As the constellating of this new creative center continued, I could feel the earlier polarization lessening. Indeed, I started reading books on John and Charles Wesley in an attempt to come to grips with, rather than oppose, my Methodist heritage. A similar shift also took place in relation to my capacities for understanding and engaging in poetic thinking, which also had been eclipsed with the rise of the youthful philosopher-scientist. With this came a much deeper appreciation of the contributions of writers and poets. In this regard, my long friendship with the Caribbean novelist and poet Wilson Harris was extremely important.

In short, this process of constellating the scattered pieces of my philosophical heritage was bringing with it deeper levels of complementarity and cooperation with the other earlier established sites of creativity and identity. At the same time that it was making stronger my philosophical sense of self, it was also bringing into deeper and more mutual creative engagements my scientific naturalism, my long-neglected poeticism, and my well-established Marxist approaches to doing sociology. The binary logics that were keeping these different discourses and their centers apart were easing significantly, making passable these once impassable disciplinary and discursive borders. *Caliban’s Reason* was the radioactive fallout from these processes of fusion and fission.

## 8 Conclusion

Difficult to believe, it is now twenty years since the publication of *Caliban’s Reason* and fifteen since the *C.L.R. James Journal* became the official publication of the CPA. Much has changed over the course of these years. Africana philosophy has gained recognition from the APA, and is taught in many more philosophy departments. I continue to teach my course on Afro-Caribbean philosophy to packed classrooms. At the same time, the processes of inner constellation and integration, which brought my philosophical “I” to the surface, have continued. It was the continuation of these processes that enabled me to grasp more fully the significance of the Akan theory of the self, and to be capable of using it here. This theory illuminated and made more explicit the complex internal process by which I was able to emerge as a philosopher—in particular, the de-escalating of inner conflicts, the deflating of egocentric claims to being the real and only self, and the making sure that my emerging philosophical “I” did not spend too much time with these hubristic claims as other personas were letting go of them and making more room for the spiritual *okra*.

In turn, this deeper understanding of my philosophical subject formation has greatly enriched my practice of philosophical production. This mutual engagement has enabled me to see the extent to which the spiral of my *akwantu*—the subjective sites on its path, the conflicts between them, and the durations I spent on them—shaped and determined the nature and level of my philosophical output. Further, I came to see interesting parallels between this spiral journeying of the *sunsum* to its eclipsed *okra* and Dante’s journey of ego from the inferno to the paradiso, and also with Hegel’s journeying of the self from sense certainty to absolute spirit. These mutual recognitions have been very good for me, and I hope will be solid contributions to Africana existential philosophy.

**Paget Henry** is professor of sociology and Africana Studies at Brown University. He is the author of four books: *Peripheral Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Antigua* (1985); *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (2000); *The Art of Mali Olatunji: Painterly Photography from Antigua and Barbuda* (2015); and *Shouldering Antigua and Barbuda: The Life of V.C. Bird* (2010). He is the coeditor of three volumes: *The Newer Caribbean* (1983); *CLR James' Caribbean* (1992); and *Journeys in Caribbean Thought* (2016). Finally, he is the editor of two journals: *The C.L.R. James Journal* and *The Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books*.