

The Politics of Coexistence in the Atlantic World

The Politics of Coexistence in the Atlantic World:

The Greater Caribbean

By

Priya Parrotta

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*For my parents
and my hometown*

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PREFACE

NICK FARACLAS

At the heart of the Afro-Atlantic, which stretches from Bahia to Benin to Bristol to Brooklyn, the Greater Caribbean has given rise to a growing body of renegade border-crossing literary and scientific work that reflects its undomesticated pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural, and pluri-identified societies. In *The Politics of Coexistence in the Greater Caribbean*, Priya Parrotta Natarajan routinely crosses neo-colonial and disciplinary borders in this rich transgressive tradition that nurtures her Caribbean roots. She also demonstrates time and again how the boundaries that usually define studies about the region have systematically hindered our understanding of its multiplex societies, cultures, spiritualities, creativity, histories and potential for contributing to the resolution of the problems of social and ecological coexistence that presently threaten our very survival on this planet. All of this she accomplishes with an openness of mind and heart that simultaneously uplifts and invites her readers to consider new ways of seeing and changing the world.

In this book, the Balkanization of the Greater Caribbean into British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and US enclaves unravels, as the artificial binary oppositions between science and art, materialist politics and spirituality, philosophy and technology, ethics and economics, work and play, past and present, local and global, native and migrant, White and Black, North and South, East and West dissolve in order to accommodate a holistic view of the region that, in contrast to more conventional approaches, does rare justice to its peoples and the pivotal role that they have played in shaping the neo-/post-colonial world that we all inhabit at present.

Parrotta Natarajan also does rare justice to the agency of the marginalized peoples of the Caribbean in forging key points of resistance to the dominant institutions that ushered in the modern world. These 'marginalized' peoples have actually constituted the majority of the peoples who have inhabited the region from the colonial era to the present. They include women who have resisted the enclosures of their control over their bodies, bloodlines, land, labor, and markets; Indigenous-

African-European descended renegades who have resisted the dominant discourses of European 'civilization' and 'racial purity'; maroons who first resisted plantation slavery and now resist wage-slavery; and pirates and criminalized social outcasts who first resisted the brutal work discipline of the ship, and now resist the brutal work discipline of the neo-liberal factory and fast-food restaurant.

As you open this book, prepare yourself to move seamlessly through multiple dimensions of space, time and understanding. If you give yourself permission to question why the Greater Caribbean has been marginalized in the dominant narratives of world history and society, you now have an opportunity to come to grips with how this region has made the modern world what it is and how this region can help us all to re-make this world in our own collective image and our own collective interests.

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For their support during the preparation of this manuscript, I would also like to thank: Maritza Stanchich, from the University of Puerto Rico; my professors at Brown University; and Jeffery Burley at the University of Oxford.

Thanks, too, to Marco McWilliams, Erik Martínez Resly and Osa Obaseki, for their inspiration and their faith. As practitioners of coexistence, they have taught me concrete lessons in the dual arts of dialogue and justice. I am equally grateful for the support of kindred spirits in Puerto Rico and around the world. My conversations with them about the art of getting along have deeply informed this project.

Lastly, I wish to thank my parents, Nalini Natarajan and John Parrotta, for their loving support. This book is dedicated to them.

INTRODUCTION

There is something about Viejo San Juan that makes one feel free. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is a beautifully maintained space, filled with cobblestoned streets and colorful buildings that regularly receive fresh coats of paint. It gives the impression of at once walking through history, and at the same time bearing witness to everything that is beautiful and new. Viejo San Juan is pulsating with life. Artisans fill the plazas on a regular basis, showcasing their works, which range from ceramics to canvasses to hats and accessories made of wood, straw, beads and even gems. Close by, men and women sell *piraguas* and *mantecados*. Walk down Calle Fortaleza, and encounter a mix of the old and the new, the local and the global. At Ayurvedics, you may find packaged herbs and snacks from India—via New York, of course. At Café Poético, the proprietor plays a mix of traditional Puerto Rican music and the occasional “world” sound. Poetry in both English and Spanish lines the walls. At the Haitian Gallery, you will encounter two stories. The first is filled with crafts imported from Puerto Rico’s close neighbor. Framed butterflies, small replicas of houses and fruit-laden carts, instruments that are played not only in Haiti, but across the region. Upstairs you will find paintings. Hundreds of them. Depicting snapshots of history that locals rarely talk about and tourists can be counted upon to not understand.

Look at the surface in Viejo San Juan, and then look beneath it, and you will understand a great deal about the place—the *situatedness*, if you like—of the Caribbean in the Americas more broadly. On the one hand, it is spectacularly beautiful, and brimming with energy and bits of inspiration. It is a soothing place for both tourists and locals, a place to come and rest and take comfort in the fact that in spite of life’s turbulence, such a landscape exists. But on the other hand, in VSJ (as it is known for short) certain pressures are at work that have defined public space, and continue to conceal the full depth, complexity, richness and vitality that is the greater Caribbean.

VSJ is a place of color, and of coexistence. People from all over the world both live and visit here, and at least on the surface, seem to get along relatively well. It is a place where material and musical culture is prized, and the benefits of this are seen at every turn. It is pluralism, painted onto walls and added to playlists. The cultural landscape of Viejo

San Juan reflects the various influences that, for some at least, tend to define contemporary, globalized life.

But like all tourist destinations, only a small portion of this place's history is on display. Stories have been stripped away, and all who visit are left to believe that the beauty they see around them just *ended up* that way—as though history, struggle, pain, resilience, and love that transcends circumstances had little to do with the evolution of the Caribbean music, art, dance, and spirituality that so many of us enjoy.

Lauryn Hill, American R&B singer and daughter-in-law of Jamaican reggae legend Bob Marley, once observed that Marley is associated with joy and light-heartedness and fun the world over. She then added that so many seem to think that his joy sprung spontaneously, but that in fact he toiled and suffered a great deal for his art. When I first heard this observation several years ago, it left an indelible impression. In the American—and possibly the global—imagination, the Caribbean is so frequently associated with all things light and carefree. And as somebody who spent a large portion of her young life in the Caribbean, I share that opinion to a certain extent. The cultural forms that have come out of this region are often filled with a real exuberance. But at the same time, the Caribbean is hardly a shallow place. It has a deep, often turbulent history. And without a knowledge of this history, one cannot claim to know about this region.

Over the course of the past few years, I have collected examples of stories—past and present—that, over time, could weave themselves together to paint a different kind of portrait of the greater Caribbean. A portrait that takes as its central concern this question: how have people in the Caribbean, past and present, lived and imagined coexistence in the modern world? Put differently, how have people in the region lived together, and what lessons and inspiration can we derive from their experiences? This book is the result of that inquiry.

I tend to think that the Caribbean is, in crucial ways, a microcosm of the world. It is socially, politically, culturally, and ecologically diverse. It has witnessed the arrival of people from all corners of the Earth to its shores, and has played host to them as they have configured and reconfigured themselves in a wide variety of ways. Its history is by turns deeply capitalistic and deeply spiritual. To return once again to art, its music and dance forms have captured the hearts of people on every continent. And while it is often boxed off from the rest of the world and/or regarded as an undifferentiated mass of islands and beaches, the fact is that its histories are multiple. The linguistic, ancestral, economic, and commercial geographies of each of the places discussed in this book are

distinct from one another. However, these differences should not prevent us from considering these different places as part of one, definable region. Avoiding generalizations, while at the same time focusing on the resonances between each of the stories in this volume, is what I have set out to do.

The “greater” Caribbean includes the islands of the Caribbean archipelago, as well as the coastal regions of Africa, Europe, and North, Central and South America that share major elements of the islands’ histories. These essays are “stories” in the sense that they each introduce the reader to a new dimension of life in the Caribbean—a new set of hopes and concerns, a new element of culture (or law, or politics, or ecology, or a combination of these) that invites us to look at the region with refreshed eyes.

The twelve episodes in this volume span several countries, historical processes, creative practices, and philosophical issues. They are grouped into six pairs, each of which affords the reader an opportunity to look closely at one dimension of life in the Caribbean. Each dimension is at once specific to the region yet also, I would hope, broadly relevant to other places and times.

The first pair focuses on the spiritual pluralism(s) which arguably form the foundation of philosophical thought and artistic tradition in the region. One chapter engages with one of the Caribbean’s most charismatic historical enigmas—the coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews in medieval Spain, and the fact that when religious minorities were expelled from Spain in 1492, they often relocated to the Caribbean and brought their dynamic history along with them. The other chapter deals with another, no less significant spiritual landscape—the dialogue between Yogic and Yoruba cosmologies in Trinidad.

The second pair concerns itself less with spiritual coexistence than it does with the politics of racial mixture in the greater Caribbean. One of the chapters focuses on early modern Mexican *casta* paintings, which depicted, in a crude and deeply colonial form, the various ways in which the people of Mexico could inter-marry or breed, and the resulting classifications of their offspring. The other, more heartening chapter discusses the historical evolution of the concept of *mulataje*, which is closely linked to the figure of the “mulatto.” It locates the origin of this concept not in the slave societies of the Caribbean, but rather in medieval Spain, where it was closely linked to bold transgression of social boundaries, and also to profound creativity and innovation. In the first example, pluralism is interpreted through a colonial lens, while in the latter, pluralism becomes a source of genuine resistance. These papers

demonstrate the vulnerability of the topic of coexistence to divergent ideological agendas.

After discussing spiritual pluralism and racial mixture, we move on to a new element of cultural landscapes: space. The two chapters in the third pair both deal with fugitive settlements—communities of escaped slaves in the Caribbean who found refuge outside the colonial centers of power and there created their own, radical societies. Here, the politics of inclusion is the topic that is under scrutiny. In “Fugas y Fronteras,” I consider the story of San Mateo de Cangrejos, an officially sanctioned settlement in Puerto Rico that on the one hand allowed its inhabitants some necessary freedoms, but also bound it to a non-negotiable situation of dependence with Viejo San Juan. Then, in “Promised Land,” I explore the ramifications of a recent land law in Brazil that claimed to return land titles to the inhabitants of *quilombos* (fugitive settlements) but ended up generating controversies about memory, pluralism and the very nature of rights. The art forms of salsa and capoeira had their origins in Spanish Caribbean and Brazilian settlements, respectively.

The two chapters in the fourth section are separated by almost four centuries. However, both deal with instances of criminalization – the marginalization of Caribbean voices by rendering them criminal. The first chapter discusses the life of Tituba—a Caribbean servant from Barbados who moved to colonial New England and, by way of welcome, was the first to be accused in the infamous Salem Witch Trials. The second tells a much more recent story of a student strike at the University of Puerto Rico, in which peaceful protestors were discursively rendered as renegades by an administration that was keen on prohibitively increasing the cost of tuition. I chose to group these two together because when paired, they seem to neatly illustrate the fact that the contemporary contradictions of neoliberalism, and the historical contradictions of Puritanism, do indeed have a great deal in common. Coexistence is important to both stories, in the sense that both depict confrontations that pit syncretism and openness against rigidity and the crude deployment of colonial infrastructure to repress an effectively much more open attitude.

The fifth pair introduces both gender and ecology into our exploration of Caribbean cultural geographies. The first is part biosketch, part broad historical overview. It tells the story of public health activist Helen Rodríguez Trías, who was one of the fiercest critics of the forced sterilization initiatives that took place in Puerto Rico in the mid-twentieth century. I explore the ways in which these reproductive rights controversies were bolstered by emerging environmentalist paradigms in the United States at the time; and in broad strokes, I suggest that the

shared degradation of women and the environment in the tropics has a long history. I follow this article with another. “Decolonial environmentalism” draws from recent research on the politics of global sustainability and offers a new philosophy that can counter the patriarchal and anti-ecological tendencies of colonialism, as well as its latent, more recent manifestations. The intention of this section, vis-à-vis the topic of coexistence, is to provide an introduction to the two characters—women and the environment—whose liberty and dignity are fundamental to the forms of coexistence that we must cultivate in our world.

Last is a rather conceptual dialogue between two ideas—“decolonial ethics” and “cosmopolitanism from below.” The former is indigenous to the Caribbean, and articulates a philosophical framework that integrates spirituality and love with a deep knowledge of the abuses that religious institutions have perpetuated in the Caribbean. The latter is a philosophy that is uniquely adapted for our current moment of globalization. It makes the case for a form of global governance that takes at its center transnational activist networks. While these two ideas emerge out of different contexts, I wish to place them side-by-side so as to highlight the ways in which they reinforce each other. In doing so, I also wish to bring this book full circle. The book begins with an exploration of the ways in which diverse spiritualities, from all over the world, found their way to the Caribbean. I wish to end it by considering the opposite: the ways in which the spirituality that has emerged from the Caribbean experience, after five centuries of creativity, contestation and coexistence, can enrich contemporary debates about the future of our societies in a time of such rapid change and earth-shattering controversy. The world came to the Caribbean—this is well agreed upon. And I wish to propose that, true to character, the Caribbean can assume a crucial place in today’s world.

As a global society, we are experiencing opportunities and crises that bring more people into deeper and more rapid contact than ever before. In this climate (literally and figuratively speaking), we must be able to identify instances of coexistence wherever they exist, and be able to foster meaningful communication wherever it falters. Each of these chapters offers inspiration and asks questions. I firmly believe that it is by combining inspiration and critical thought that we will be able to heal the broad rifts and near-fatal wounds that often keep human beings apart—and which will only deepen if we leave them unaddressed.

Initially, the title of this book was “Tempestad Tranquila.” This title contains several layers of meaning for me that are important for this introduction. It alludes to William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, whose tropes continue to manifest themselves in the ways in which the Caribbean

is represented and understood. It is also the title of a song by Cultura Profética, a Puerto Rican reggae band whose music has provided the soundtrack for much of the island's "counter-culture." Their popularity borders on the cliché, but their songs' messages of social consciousness enliven and bring peace to many people in the region, every day.

By "tempestad *tranquila*" I mean to suggest the beautiful paradox which is, to me, at the heart of every true story of coexistence. Coexistence is not only about tranquility, nor is it only about the excitement, the rumble, the *tempest*, that comes from people of diverse histories and backgrounds coming into contact with one another. On the contrary, coexistence is (in my opinion) the meeting of these two sensibilities. Productive turbulence and necessary peace. It is an open question, and a tantalizing promise. By virtue of its complex history, the Caribbean is particularly well suited to the task of offering lessons to the rest of the world about the art and practice of coexistence. Being as it is a crucible for some of modernity's most luminous displays of creativity, as well as its most lurid examples of exploitation, its people and ecosystems have produced scenarios of coexistence in which each generate their own unique set of observations and insights. We would all do well to respect the details of these stories, and learn from their trajectories.

CHAPTER ONE

CULTURE AND OTHER QUESTIONS: MARÍA ROSA MENOCAI'S *ORNAMENT OF THE WORLD*

“Books—and the kindred fruits of the human imagination—often reveal that beneath the façades of even the most strident official tyranny, social and cultural intercourse will surely try to carry on. The artifacts... are themselves the acts of tolerance and resistance, or at least their best concrete measure.” (Menocal 2002, 278).

A dimension of Caribbean history which is not always showcased in standard history books but which is often discussed in the region—in university classrooms and coffeehouses alike—is the legacy of medieval Spain in the Latin Caribbean. In 1492, the reigning Catholic monarchs in Spain—Ferdinand and Isabela— completed three projects that would define Spain’s geopolitical image and activities for centuries to come. The first was the “discovery” of the New World by Christopher Columbus. The second was the conquest of Granada, one of Spain’s southernmost provinces and the last stronghold of Muslim leadership and cultural influence in the peninsula. And the third was the expulsion of the Jews, who had (like the Muslims) been persecuted for decades under the Spanish Inquisition and would now irreversibly be driven from their homes.

The narrative taught in many high school classes in the Americas is that after these three events, the landmass of Spain was firmly consolidated under a Catholic monarchy with fierce imperial ambitions and little tolerance for cultural and spiritual diversity of any kind. While this is generally true, this narrative of post-1492 bigotry and conquest often overshadows another dimension of the same history, which is anchored in the following question: What happened to the Moors and Jews (and their sociocultural legacies) after they were expelled from Granada?

The word on the proverbial Caribbean street is that many of these now-religious minorities came to the islands, and that the culture of pluralism—which was now verboten on the Iberian Peninsula—was transported along

with them. One of the most celebrated authors on tolerance in medieval Iberia is María Rosa Menocal, whose 2002 bestseller *Ornament of the World* contains numerous examples of cultural exchange across social divides. Though she does not discuss the Caribbean in her book, she raises many questions that are startlingly relevant to the subject of coexistence in the greater Caribbean. In fact, at times her portrayal of medieval Iberia bears such a close resemblance to the cultural and political landscapes of countries such as Brazil and Puerto Rico that we must wonder if, in some ways, the geographies of coexistence that we see daily in the greater Caribbean have some of their origins in a society on the other side of the world—that of the “greater Mediterranean”.

This chapter explores several aspects of Menocal’s work which resonate with the themes explored in the following chapters. It is meant to lay a light foundation for some of the more specific questions that are investigated later on in this book through precise examples from the Latin Caribbean.

The Mediterranean has historically engaged in forms of political administration and social practice that are at once tolerant and stratified. In medieval Spain (or al-Andalus, as it was then known), religious minorities were required to pay taxes and declare their allegiance to their rulers. At the same time, their artistic and other cultural traditions were often embraced by the “mainstream.” At times, these art forms were incorporated into court culture and were celebrated for their beauty and sophistication. These two, seemingly contradictory elements of the Mediterranean landscape—clear political hierarchies on the one hand, and cultural openness and fluidity on the other—are the subject of Menocal’s book. They also continue to reverberate in the vibrancy, pluralism, and inequalities of the greater Caribbean.

In *Ornament of the World*, María Rosa Menocal relays an assortment of moments from medieval al-Andalus’ political and cultural history. Taken together, they demonstrate the complex and often counter-intuitive relationship between culture and politics in societies that are peopled by multiple religious or ethnic groups. Menocal writes that medieval Iberians “nourished a complex culture of tolerance” (11), and she defines tolerance as “the often unconscious acceptance that contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one’s culture—[can] be positive and productive” (11). The idea that contradictions can be socially invigorating and can ultimately contribute to true tolerance runs throughout Menocal’s book. And by her own account, medieval Spain was filled with fascinating contradictions that are by turns inspiring, and by turns puzzling.

Menocal writes beautiful passages on architectural, musical, literary, philosophical, and, most importantly, linguistic innovations and collaborations that originated in medieval Iberia. Her focus is on the “culture of translation, perforce of tolerance” (197) which not only facilitated broader dissemination of knowledge throughout Europe, but also fostered important intellectual breakthroughs—most notably, the reconciliation of faith-based and reason-based schools of thought (204).

Menocal's narrative focuses on “the noble effort to produce and maintain a first-rate culture, one that could hold together, at the same time and in the same place, two contradictory modes of thought and belief” (204-5). At times, it seems as though the fluid movement of music, poetry, design, and ideas from one subculture to another provides ample proof that people in medieval Spain were, by and large, peaceful, tolerant, and generally content. But at other instances, these examples of cultural diversity do not entirely convince us that respectful and inclusive political relations were the order of the day. Marginalization of religious minorities, and deep inclusion of their cultural forms, seemed to exist comfortably side-by-side.

By established accounts, medieval Iberia was at once diverse, inclusive, separate and unequal. Menocal tends to downplay the controversy inherent in that fact by emphasizing the importance of being able to understand and appreciate the contradictions that underpin all pluralistic societies. Menocal writes that the “Andalusian story reveals the intractable tensions between our desire for cultural coherence, on the one hand, and the excitement and vitality of contradictions in ourselves and in our midst, on the other” (277). She implores us to let go of our desire for cultural homogeneity and the myth of absolute agreement between human beings, and reminds us that cultural dynamism is much more a gift than it is a liability.

In the Caribbean, such advice is appropriate but not necessary: this region has been diverse since precolonial times. But although this is true, it does not follow that socioeconomic equality and political justice are woven into the fabric of the region. On the contrary, the countries of the Caribbean have suffered under the joint injustices of colonialism, patriarchy and environmental degradation. People in the Caribbean today must contend with difficult legacies such as vulnerability, exploitation, appropriation and division. And in this context, the region's exceptional diversity does not always come to the rescue. For instance, the fact that reggae and samba are popular forms of music does not mean that people of African descent in the region have been granted the full spectrum of rights and opportunities that the political systems of the governments who rule

them claim to offer. The anecdotes in Menocal's book invite the question: what makes cultural history politically meaningful? They remind us that while both culture and politics are fascinating topics of study, we should not make assumptions about one simply because we have some knowledge of the other.

Menocal concludes her book with a description of Ferdinand and Isabella “[marching] up the hill to the Alhambra to take formal possession of Granada dressed in their Arab finery” (270). She interprets this scene not as “posturing and deceit, conspiracy and duplicity” (270), but rather as evidence that “the possibility for religious and cultural tolerance was still there” (270). Though I respect Menocal's observation, I am inclined to disagree.

It is possible that Ferdinand and Isabella may not have perceived any strong relationship, positive or negative, between the clothing they were wearing and the territory they were about to conquer; indeed, those associations may have disappeared generations ago. It is more probable, however, that the monarchs donned Arab clothing as a form of appropriation. By dressing as they did, they inserted themselves, and their imperial agenda, into a newly conquered landscape under (quite literally) a false guise. It is quite likely that this fashion choice was a deliberate act of control, intended to extinguish the cultural voices of their newly subdued subjects once and for all.

Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain the precise relationship between culture—what people drink and wear, how they mourn and celebrate, when and why they pray—and political questions of justice and equality. It is particularly difficult to do so when researching a society that “officially” died at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet medieval al-Andalus is in fact one of the Caribbean's inheritances, and as a result its accomplishments and dilemmas remain relevant to this day.

CHAPTER TWO

ILLUSTRATING THE SELF: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN YOGIC AND YORUBA TRADITIONS

The massive dislocations and transplantations that took place in the early colonial period as a result of plantation slavery and indenture brought two ancient spiritual systems—the Yoruba and the Yogic—into close proximity with each other. Although these two systems of thought originated in separate continents—Yoruba from West Africa, and Yoga from the Indian subcontinent—, and although racial tensions in the Caribbean have historically impeded dialogue between these worldviews, profound resonances exist between these philosophies. Particularly with respect to conceptions of the self, Yoruba and Yogic ideas about the existential anatomy of a human being, the role of the divine in a human life, and conceptualizations of psychospiritual integration both challenge and complement each other in extremely meaningful ways. Placing them in opposition to each other would diminish them both.

In many ways, sociopolitical division between people of African and South Asian descent is a persistent feature of Caribbean nations which are home to large populations of both—specifically, Trinidad and Guyana. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in the early nineteenth century, men and women were brought from India (and elsewhere) to the greater Caribbean to provide new labor. While indenture did not reach the same level of brutality as slavery, it was an undeniably violent and exploitative practice that condemned people of Indian descent to social indignity and political disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, men and women from South Asia were often resented by people of African descent because they now provided the cheap labor that the plantation economy required. In the process, they reduced the possibilities for waged employment for newly “emancipated” people who had for generations been cruelly enslaved.

Following the end of indenture in the early twentieth century, Indians received land and in time became wealthy through their involvement in

emerging economic sectors such as crude oil. Political parties were divided along these ethnic and racial(ized) lines, and at certain points the tension between the two groups resulted in severe, politically impelled violence. Of course, there are also numerous examples in both Trinidad and Guyana of exuberant expressions of artistic unity, such as during Carnival, and widespread social acceptance of both the differences and shared histories and heritages of the two groups. A discussion of Yogic and Yoruba spiritualities would be incomplete without acknowledging both the tension and the dialogue that so define Indo-African coexistence in the greater Caribbean. But ultimately, this chapter is preoccupied less with this history than it is with the philosophical resonances between these two systems of thought. The points of divergence between these two philosophies simply reveal the importance of placing them in dialogue with one another.

A brief note: In this chapter, “Yogic philosophy” refers to those perspectives within the vast tradition of Hinduism which have, over time, coalesced into the spiritual discipline that we now call “Yoga.” When I say that Yoga was brought to the Caribbean by indentured laborers in the nineteenth century, I mean more specifically that Brahmins who came to the region carried over these cosmologies. However, it is extremely important that I mention that, along with Yoga, indentured peoples also brought with them folk traditions that have very different conceptions of spirituality and a life well lived. These perspectives, as well as the artistic and cultural practices within which they were enshrined, deeply inform spirituality in the Caribbean—arguably more so than the Yoga discussed in this chapter.

As is the case with many of the world’s spiritualities, both Yogic and Yoruba philosophies are, broadly speaking, ego-critical (Henry 2008, 5). In other words, they both acknowledge the limitations—and even the dangers—of the human ego. They are both preoccupied with the effect that ego-based qualities like arrogance, greed, and a fundamental sense of separation from others have on both individual equanimity and social harmony. The phrase “psychospiritual integration” allows us to understand this concern further. By “psychospiritual integration,” I refer to a form of inner balance which is attained when both psychology and spirituality are aligned within us, so as to empower rather than undermine our peace and confidence as we move through life. Psychology might be described as the way in which we mentally process information and make decisions. Spirituality, on the other hand, can be understood as that aspect of our being which is beyond precise analysis—our hearts and souls, if you like. Yogic and Yoruba cosmologies both affirm that psychospiritual

integration is important, as is the transcendence of the human ego. They further assert that psychospiritual integration cannot be achieved so long as our actions (and reactions) are informed by our egos.

Yogic and Yoruba traditions eschew the ego, but this does not mean that their descriptions of the anatomy and spirituality of the human self are the same. On the contrary: Yoruba philosophy uses the language of the body to explain the world of emotions, while Yogic philosophy prefers to deal in abstractions. Put differently, the former grounds the self in the body, while the latter tends to emphasize the ability of the intangible mind to direct our spiritual practice. The Yoruba conception of self, by virtue of its physical language, inspires groundedness, whereas Yogic philosophy, because of its emphasis on the immaterial, makes the idea of ego transcendence more easily understood. These two elements—groundedness and transcendence—are both essential to sustained psychospiritual integration.

Heart, spine, brain, stomach. In colloquial English, these words have two possible meanings. They can refer to physical organs upon which we depend for our material survival. However, they can also be used as metaphors which help us to illustrate people's emotional traits. Our affection arises from the heart, our assertiveness from the spine, our common sense from the brain, and our ability to deal with discomfort from the stomach. In this sense, the Yoruba method of illustrating the complexities of the self is quite similar.

The Yoruba describe humans as being made up of physico-material and mental-spiritual components (Gbadegesin 1998, 50). As is the case in the English language, emotional components of a human being are often described through anatomical descriptors. For instance, the *okàn* is acknowledged as the physical organ responsible for the circulation of blood, but it is also conceived as the source of emotional and psychic reactions (50). As with the English word "heart," the *okàn* is conceived as "something like an invisible source of thought and emotions that makes it quite distinct from the physical heart" (31). Bravery, fear, love, hate, joy, sadness, and cowardice are all understood to arise from the *okàn*.

In a similar way, the *ifun* (intestine) builds strength through metabolic activity, while the *opolo* (brain) controls the mental activity of human beings—these words are often used to describe social characteristics that parallel these physical functions. The *ara* is, broadly speaking, the body—the word is sometimes used to describe selfishness, the act of caring only for one's body. The *ara* and the *okàn*, combined with the *ori* (the determinant of the personality of the individual) and the *emi* (the active life force supplied by the deity), are the main components of an individual

(42). The boundaries between them are not absolute, and taken together they constitute the complex of traits and capabilities that an individual possesses. The ego is not described as a separate organ. Instead, it seems as though an overabundance of egotism in an individual manifests itself in excesses or deficiencies of other sites of self-development—which are described anatomically, but which, as Gbadegesin repeatedly points out, were not thought of as anatomical entities in a literal sense.

Yoruba philosophy uses the body to illustrate the complexities of human life, and to aid in the challenge of locating and controlling the ego. Yogic philosophy, on the other hand, has a more problematic relationship with the body, and this informs the vocabulary and logic through which it describes the human's quest for peace—for ego transcendence and psychospiritual integration.

As is the case in Yoruba philosophy, the ego is not described as a physical organ in Yogic philosophy. But unlike in Yoruba philosophy, the Yogic conception of the self makes a strict distinction between qualities which are linked to the survival of the human ego, and qualities which aid humans in the transcendence of that ego. The geography of the human self that the Yogic tradition is known for tends to be vertical. That is, transcending the ego is a step-by-step process, and it involves making frequent value judgments about the body. Unlike either Yoruba philosophy, or the world's poetic traditions, Yogic philosophy tends to not allow for ambivalence when it comes to issues of body and spirit. The idea that the physical life of an ordinary human being can be a vehicle for the most profound of spiritual realizations is not a very Yogic idea. The most respected physical traditions of what we might call the Yogic traditions are grounded in deep physical discipline.

The *gunas* and the *atman* are two of the most important elements of Yogic philosophy, especially when it comes to the question of regulating the ego and realizing the highest qualities of oneself. I need to reiterate here, that these two tasks are of chief importance in both traditions, though they are illustrated differently in each. In Yogic philosophy, the creative energies and capabilities within us are collectively called the *gunas*. They constitute “important phases in the development of self-creating capabilities by the ego, and hence the horizons within which we feel, think, and act” (Henry 2008, 5-6). We might say that they are the building blocks, the threads, that make up our personalities—and by extension, our goals, judgments, tastes, and emotional landscapes. They arise from *prakriti*, which Henry defines as “the cosmic womb, the dynamic and ever-moving cycles of pre-conscious creative energy that are responsible

for the world of material nature” (5). The *prakriti* is often described as containing earth, water, fire, air, ether, intellect, and ego.

The three *gunas* differ in their properties and in the degree to which they are able to move a person closer to an awareness of *purusha*-- “the very silent, unmoved mover from which [*prakriti*] draws its energy” (Henry 2008, 6). *Tamas* is the most problematic of the *gunas*—it is incapable of truly recognizing the independence of other beings in the world, and is typically associated with stagnant and unproductive energy. *Rajas* is associated with passion, and it is the source of our desire for pleasure, possessions, and emotional comforts—as Henry describes, the “capacity to relate to others as independent subjects [in *tamas*] is significantly greater [than *rajas*] but by no means perfect” (6). *Sattwa* is the highest of the three *gunas*. It represents rationality and longing for knowledge. Its consciousness is “truth-orienting but not truth-possessing.” In other words, “it can make one scholarly and wise, but it cannot by itself overcome its attachments to the limits of intellect and reason, or completely free itself from its interconnections with the other two” (7).

Yogic philosophy consistently makes clear that no activity generated by the ego (*jivatman*)—in other words, no activity directly stemming from the *gunas*—can produce a direct experience of cosmic union. This experience of union, or *Samadhi*, stems from our realization of the divine principle within us and within the cosmos (*atman*). The place of the practices of yoga and meditation within Yogic philosophy is to cultivate the internal conditions necessary for realization of the *atman* and the attainment of *Samadhi*. Transcendence of the self—no matter how clear or wise—is a requirement if we are to realize our highest nature, and our union with all life.

The above analysis has shown that the Yoruba and Yogic conceptions of the self differ to a significant degree. However, hopefully it is also clear that the differences between these two philosophies do not make them fundamentally incompatible. Rather, they share similar goals, and the insights and analytic constructs that they each set forth are all extremely useful and can certainly be taken together. Though they may express it differently, both regard ego displacement as essential for self-realization. For both, psychospiritual integration is essential, and that integration involves the displacement (or transcendence, whichever word one prefers) of the part of our being that seeks only to survive—the ego.

Both philosophies are holistic. Contrary to what has been said by thinkers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Naipaul, Brahmanic spiritualism is not necessarily a “static, world-rejecting discourse” (5). And contrary to popular belief, Yoruba ideas are not excessively material

or body-oriented (Gbadegesin 1998, 45). On the contrary, when interpreted in its most robust form, Yogic philosophy is as conscious of the material world as Yoruba philosophy is. And Yoruba philosophy is wise to the stubborn nature of the ego, and the spiritual importance of transcending it—as is Yogic philosophy. Indeed, when the cosmologies of these two are brought into dialogue with each other, they present a wide array of options for the spiritual seeker. They answer each other's absences, and can weave together to create a formidable philosophical framework that could be of great benefit to the Caribbean and beyond.

Both Yogic and Yoruba traditions are intensely spiritual (in that neither offers insights into material life *per se*), and the way they express ideas about emotion and self-formation harmonize well with one another. Yoruba philosophy, with its anatomical imagery, has an extremely grounding effect. The symbolic correlation of emotional qualities with particular centers in the body provide an extremely effective starting point for people who want to attain harmony and integration at different emotional registers in their lives. Yogic philosophy, meanwhile, with its philosophical texts (such as the *Upanishads*) and its systems of yoga and meditation, provides people with important insights and resources when it comes to training the mind and cultivating a spiritual practice grounded in discipline and a directed meditation on divine consciousness. Clearly, the tools that these two discourses of self-realization set up are not incompatible. Rather, they offer separate but interdependent insights on the same central spiritual problem. To describe these two philosophies as fundamentally incompatible, and presenting each system as implicitly discrediting the other, would polarize them severely and impoverish them both.

Another similarity between Yoruba and Yogic systems of thought—aside from their shared core concerns and their shared spiritual preoccupations with the origin, nature, and purpose of being (Henry 2008, 23)—lies in their shared ability to accommodate both ritual- and non-ritual-based forms of spiritual practice. Both Yoruba and Hindu traditions have origin narratives, to which these traditions' conceptions of the self are inevitably connected. They both have pantheons of gods—such as Varuna, Indra, Agni, and Soma in Vedic philosophy and Shango (the Yoruba god of thunder) in Yoruba philosophy. Those gods form, in both traditions, a “sacred canopy” (6) that provides an important foundation for many followers of both traditions, and which can be worshipped through dramatic and performing arts and religious ritual. These two traditions, of course, also have extremely deeply developed non-ritualistic philosophies, which have been developed throughout this chapter. This shared quality of openness towards artistic and philosophical, ritualistic and non-ritualistic,

forms of practice is extremely significant because it speaks to a certain degree of natural syncretism and capacity for dialogue that is not shared by all traditions in the world. It is an extremely fortunate characteristic, and will hopefully foster vibrant exchange between these two traditions in the near future.

Though it is unconventional to discuss one's own upbringing and spiritual orientation in a chapter such as this, I would like to here because I believe that my personal experiences growing up in the Caribbean might shed further light on the vast potential of Yogic and Yoruba cosmologies to reinforce each other, and join in the service of positive change.

My conception of the self is, in certain ways, different from both of these philosophies, even though I grew up in close proximity to both. I am very deeply influenced by mystical poetry, and since philosophy cannot offer a particularly poetic or literary conception of the world, I have sometimes found that even the philosophies which I respect most deeply do not always provide complete comfort. However, for the most part, my conception of the self is extremely consistent with the conceptions set forth in both Yoruba and Yogic philosophy. I believe that displacing the ego to create space for inspiration is an absolutely essential component of self-realization, and I also believe that that process of ego displacement requires both the cultivation of mindfulness and clarity, as well as harmony with the surrounding world.

My spiritual orientation relies deeply on syncretism, as it is manifested not only in philosophy, but also in culture more broadly. I fully share the belief that self-realization comes from developing an awareness of oneself as being moved and inspired by a loving, harmonious force greater than ourselves. I also share the belief that complete psychospiritual integration involves a harmonizing of the various self-creative forces within us—and certainly, finding our place within our historical moment—with the aim of living with and for psychospiritual harmony on a global, ecosystemic level. I deeply identify with the idea that, as living beings, we must aim to attain divine consciousness so that we can, through our own creative capacities, live in the world in a truly inspired way. It seems as though both Yogic and Yoruba philosophies support this idea, but maybe it is only now, in an age of constant interdependence at a global level, that we are realizing the importance of engaged spirituality.

I also believe deeply in the importance of harnessing our own creative faculties, and it is because of both this belief and my love of the arts that I am drawn to mystical traditions such as Sufism. I share with many of the world's most beloved mystics the belief that there are infinite paths to the divine, that the divine dwells within us as pure love, and that the divine

can be expressed in a variety of ways, from philosophical to artistic. In that sense, then, my conception of the self resonates deeply with Yoruba and Yogic philosophies, particularly as far as analytic tools and meditative practices are concerned. However, I have also been drawn to other traditions because of the ways that they have been able to shed new light on practices that I might have adopted in the past. This process of ongoing dialogue is, in my opinion, fundamental to psychospiritual, social, and intellectual growth. And for that reason, it seems essential that dialogue between Afro- and Indo-Caribbean traditions open up. The deep resonances between them could serve as a powerful force for social, cultural, political, and historical healing in the Caribbean, and beyond.

Uncomfortable differences often exist between cultural and political histories in “hybrid” or “plural” societies, and these tensions must be recognized. Similarly, we often encounter contradictions when we probe the relationships between spiritual systems, on-the-ground interactions, and the perspectives that real co-existence requires. Indian and African cosmologies, as well as people of Indian and African descent, cannot be described with any authority in a few short pages. But considering potential symbioses between spiritual systems is, in my opinion, an important step towards affirming celebration and co-existence wherever it exists, and locating a core of shared truth, or belief, or wisdom, whenever conflict arises.