





a caribbean journal of criticism

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The Small Axe Project consists of this: to participate both in the renewal of practices of intellectual criticism in the Caribbean and in the expansion/revision of the horizons of such criticism. We acknowledge of course a tradition of social, political, and cultural criticism in and about the regional/diasporic Caribbean. We want to honor that tradition but also to argue with it, because in our view it is in and through such argument that a tradition renews itself, that it carries on its quarrel with the generations of itself: retaining/revising the boundaries of its identity, sustaining/altering the shape of its self-image, defending/resisting its conceptions of history and community. It seems to us that many of the conceptions that guided the formation of our Caribbean modernities—conceptions of class, gender, nation, culture, race, for example, as well as conceptions of sovereignty, development, democracy, and so on—are in need of substantial rethinking. What we aim to do in our journal is to provide a forum for such rethinking. We aim to enable an informed and sustained debate about the present we inhabit, its political and cultural contours, its historical conditions and global context, and the critical languages in which change can be thought and alternatives reimagined. Such a debate we would insist is not the prerogative of any single genre, and therefore we invite fiction as well as nonfiction, poetry, interviews, visual art, and reviews.

This issue of *Small Axe* is dedicated to the memory of Alton Ellis (1 September 1938–10 October 2008), Jamaican troubadour and innovator.

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Preface: The Paradox of Beginnings

David Scott

I begin here again,
begin until this ocean's
a shut book, and, like a bulb
the white moon's filaments wane
—Derek Walcott, *Another Life*

The miracle of *Small Axe*, if I may be permitted to call it that, has very much to do with its willing proximity—its candid openness—to the problem of beginnings.¹ Perhaps time—*more* time—will alter this relationship. I don't know. But such as we have been up until now as a Caribbean platform for criticism, we have been obliged, and indeed have obliged ourselves, to think self-consciously and reiteratively about beginnings, about the curious, puzzling ways in which, as idea and as activity, beginnings always constitute a sort of paradox: a point of departure that—simultaneously—affirms *and* disavows, acknowledges *and* displaces, creates *and* repeats. Such I suppose is the fertility and ambiguity of beginnings. And when in the itinerant years of the mid- to late 1990s (returning to think about the Caribbean from a decade's work on Sri Lanka, and returning to the University of the West Indies from teaching at the University of Chicago), I initiated the Small Axe Project in collaboration with a number of colleagues, the question of *beginnings* was very much on my mind. What did an undertaking

¹ I am of course aware of Edward Baugh's important essay on a *beginning* of truly seminal significance, "Frank Collymore and the Miracle of *Bim*," *New World Quarterly* 3, nos. 1–2 (Dead Season 1966 / Croptime 1967): 129–33.

such as inaugurating a journal of criticism consist of? What did it entail as an intellectual as well as a practical matter? What did it imply regarding our attitude toward the received state of knowledges *from* and *about* the Caribbean? If beginnings always presuppose *prior* beginnings, how were we to mark our departures *from*, as well as our continuities *with*, these former—formative—beginnings? How were we to establish a freeing *independence* from these pasts, our inheritances, which could nevertheless constitute an agonistic, quarrelsome *recognition* of our continuous debt to them?

To be sure, I don't mean to suggest here that there is any novelty in this attitude toward beginnings. Readers of the late Edward Said will no doubt remember the seminal book in which he takes up precisely this theme of the relationship of criticism (or of *writing*, more generally) to the idea of beginnings.² For Said, the problem of beginnings was of central—indeed of *animating*—concern to the proper practice of criticism. This is because beginnings (“a general term covering a large variety of scattered occasions”³) condense a number of intersecting issues, values, and concepts—among them language, creativity, intention, authority, style, authenticity, mimesis, time, conjuncture, and so on. Beginnings imply *undertaking*, entering a field, intervention, and therefore the self-conscious, reflective *marking* of a difference. Beginnings are *enabling*: they are creative and critical; they open up cognitive space. So that for Said, famously, there was an important distinction to be drawn between the concern with “beginnings” and the concern with “origins,” the former, in contrast with the latter, being an always *situated*, and therefore *historicizable*, activity. But beginnings are also recursive, conserving, connected to the pasts from which they take their leave and measure their distance. Capturing the essential paradox, Said offered the view that beginning “ultimately implies return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment”; a beginning “not only creates but is its own method because it has intention. In short, beginning is making or producing difference; but—and here is the great fascination in the subject—difference which is the result of combining the already-familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language.”⁴

I have always thought of *Small Axe* as a beginning that stands in relation to two prior beginnings, earlier moments of intellectual work in and on the Anglo-Creole Caribbean, moments that I count as founding for my own intellectual formation: the moment of *New World Quarterly* in the 1960s; and the moment of *Savacou* in the 1970s. To my mind, these are the two great independent journals of the post-independence Anglo-Creole Caribbean, and thinking about their emergence—and their passing—is indispensable for understanding the distinctiveness of the moment of departure of *Small Axe*.

The historical-ideological moment of *New World Quarterly* was that of the final winding down of British colonialism in the region, the collapse of the short-lived West Indies Federation,

2 See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

3 *Ibid.*, 39.

4 *Ibid.*, xvii.

the background roar of the Cuban Revolution, and the new dawn of political sovereignties in the Anglo-Creole Caribbean. It was a moment of considerable ambiguity—both hope and doubt—for those whose lives had been shaped by the stepwise process of constitutional decolonization initiated in the 1940s. For Lloyd Best, the central figure in the New World group as it coalesced in the troubled light of Georgetown, British Guiana, in 1963, the radicalism of the journal project was to inhere in its anti-doctrinaire commitment to reason’s critical and exploratory impulses.⁵ “For us,” argued the unsigned “Editorial” of 1966 (likely written by Best), “radicalism is nothing more nor less than a sustained application of thought to the matters that concern us deeply. We begin at a position free of restrictive doctrine; we shall arrive wherever our own uninhibited thinking carries us.”⁶ In general, *New World Quarterly* opened its pages to a range of material, but perhaps most distinctively it sought to explore the disjuncture between the *political* and *economic* dimensions of the new sovereignty, and to do this in an idiom and vocabulary attentive to the specificity of the Caribbean’s formative colonial history. And memorably, what emerged from this work of reason was the figure of the “plantation” as a material and metaphorical source for the construction of a model of the structural continuities of Caribbean dependence, and against the persistence of which to imagine the outlines of a more profound vision of Caribbean freedom. Undoubtedly, Best’s 1967 essay “Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom” stands as iconic of the ethos of the New World project. An eloquent articulation of Best’s unwavering commitment to the idea of the public use of reason, the essay deconstructed the model of economic development—“industrialization by invitation”—that kept the Caribbean enclosed in the old circuits of imperial power and that constrained the prospects for real social change. But the deeper moral-political force of Best’s argument was the urgent sense that such change in the Caribbean entailed a fundamental philosophical *reorientation* away from sycophantic dependence on metropolitan conceptual models and imperatives. Our energies, he urged, have to be self-determined: “If we are to act for change, our philosophers and our theorists have first to understand how we relate to ourselves and to the wider world in which we live.”⁷ But profound though its intervention was, *New World Quarterly* would not much outlive the moment of the 1960s—the last issue appeared in 1972; as Best was to claim later: “The movement was hard put to survive the rise of Black Power in the turn to the 1970s and the resurgence of [M]arxism which followed. Above all, it barely survived the floodgates of island independence.”⁸

5 On this moment, see David Scott, “The Vocation of a Caribbean Intellectual: An Interview with Lloyd Best,” *Small Axe*, no. 1 (March 1997): 119–39.

6 “Editorial,” *New World Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1966): unpaginated. At the time, George Beckford and Lloyd Best were listed on the masthead as managing editors.

7 Lloyd Best, “Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom,” *New World Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Cropover 1967): 28. For a very useful set of discussions of Best and his work, and of this essay in particular, see Selwyn Ryan, ed., *Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom: Essays in Honour of Lloyd Best* (St. Augustine: Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies, 2003).

8 Lloyd Best, “Passing of Initiative,” in George Lamming, ed., *On the Canvas of the World* (Port of Spain: Trinidad and Tobago Institute of the West Indies, 1999), 8.

It is precisely this “turn to the 1970s” that was the occasion for *Savacou*, which occupies, therefore, a different moment and has a different location than does *New World Quarterly*, with continuities as well as discontinuities between their preoccupations, contributors, and audience. *Savacou* grew out of the Caribbean Artists Movement, initiated in Britain in the mid-1960s (the first of its meetings was held on 10 March 1967) largely through the creative and organizational energies of Kamau Brathwaite (poet, historian, and critic), John La Rose (poet and publisher), and Andrew Salkey (novelist, broadcaster, and poet). The journal itself came into being in Jamaica in 1970 shortly after the arrival at the University of the West Indies of Brathwaite and Kenneth Ramchand (a literary critic).⁹ This was of course a time of considerable upheaval in the Anglo-Creole Caribbean, when a sense of bitter disappointment over the neocolonial and often corrupt and repressive character of the new nation-states was feeding a social and political radicalization articulated principally (but not exclusively) in idioms of Black Power. In Jamaica it was the moment of an urban, assertive Rastafari voice shaping the avant-garde of cultural protest (a voice that would soon, among other things, alter the *sound* and vision of popular Jamaican music). So that the expulsion and banning of Walter Rodney upon his return to Kingston from the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal on 15 October 1968 was only tinder to a box that was ready to explode.¹⁰ And not surprisingly, perhaps, the explosion that rippled across the Anglo-Creole Caribbean in its wake (energized by the 1970 “Black Power Revolution” in Trinidad) generated a double effect: on the one hand, it marked a shift to the left in the politics of the region (the building of social movements around newspapers and magazines—*Abeng* in Jamaica, *Moko* and *Tapia* in Trinidad, *Ratoon* in Guyana—that mutated by the mid-1970s into Marxist political parties angling for state power), and on the other, it made “culture” visible as a domain of power and struggle.

This is the moment of *Savacou*. It signaled a cultural turn *avant la lettre*, so to speak. Largely under Brathwaite’s direction, *Savacou* constructed a platform on which practices of cultural representation (whether in literature or popular culture) could be read as embodying a critical value irreducible to their seeming virtue as left political strategy.¹¹ This tension between Brathwaite’s vernacular or “cultural” critique and the Marxist’s “political” or rationalist one was perhaps captured most succinctly in Brathwaite’s critical reading of Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, an instance of anti-imperialist historical revisionism written by an avowedly culturally sensitive Marxist. In this wonderfully symptomatic reading, Brathwaite recognizes and applauds the heterodoxy of Rodney’s Marxism, but chides him searchingly in

9 On the Caribbean Artists Movement see Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992).

10 On this moment, see Rupert Lewis, *Walter Rodney’s Intellectual and Political Thought* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1999).

11 Classic of this kind of reductionism was, of course, Trevor Munroe, “Black Power and Political Strategy in Jamaica,” *Bongo-Man* (June 1969): 1–14. For a discussion of some of the implications, see David Scott, “The Dialectic of Defeat: An Interview with Rupert Lewis,” *Small Axe*, no. 10 (September 2001): 98, 103–9.

the end for sacrificing the “dialect” to the “dialectic” in his historical understanding.¹² In not too dissimilar terms, Brathwaite defined his own project against two other—non-Marxist—frameworks of Caribbean studies, namely, Lloyd Best’s “plantation” model and M. G. Smith’s “plural society” model. And one of the places in which Brathwaite articulated his critique was in his essay “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” published in *Savacou* in 1975, an essay perhaps emblematic of how he sought to alter the frame of Caribbean studies.¹³ On the one hand, Smith’s pluralism model was too rigidly “structural” and “classificatory” and therefore “static,” and consequently it paid insufficient attention to cultural *process*, in particular, the dynamic intercultural process of “creolization.” On the other hand, Best’s social science model of the plantation was too preoccupied with the *external* relations of exploitation and dependence (the “outer plantation”); what it neglected as a consequence were the “inscapes” of our cultural reality, the “inner plantation” of vernacular institutions and practices: “cores and kernels, resistant local forms; roots, stumps, survival rhythms; growing points.”¹⁴ What Brathwaite sought was a mode of investigation that combined, as he said, the “social arts” with the social sciences. As a journal project, *Savacou* came to an end with its 1977 special edition “Caribbean Woman,” as the left cultural-political project entered its terminal crisis.

To my mind, these two journal projects taken together—*New World Quarterly* and *Savacou*—map different moments of a whole era in the postcolonial Anglo-Creole Caribbean: the era of what I have been calling, following Samir Amin, the Bandung project of nation-building. It is an era that, I suspect, has now effectively closed as a cycle of possibilities of social and political transformation. The respective interventions of *New World Quarterly* and *Savacou*, as I have suggested, were organized around different objects and different communities of discourse, distinctive if overlapping intellectual publics, but for both journal projects the nation-state remained an anticolonial achievement whose promise was there to be fulfilled, a horizon whose future remained open, however dim and troubled the distance between the reality and the ideal. It is the collapse of this horizon of plausible futures, and their languages of political-economic critique and cultural nationalism, that prepares the cognitive space for the moment of *Small Axe*.

Unlike its predecessors *Small Axe* did not (and does not) ride the wave of a cultural or political movement. It did not (and does not) inhabit a present with an unambiguously beckoning future (and given the nature of our recurrent nostalgias and the longings for emancipation so inscribed in our cultural-political imagination, it is necessary to sometimes remind ourselves of this simple historical fact). The moment of *Small Axe* is a moment of political

12 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Dialect and Dialectic,” *Bulletin of the African Studies Association of the West Indies*, no. 6 (December 1973): 89–99.

13 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou* 11/12 (September 1975): 1–11. Much of the argument had already been made in his *Contradictory Omens* (Mona: Savacou, 1974).

14 *Ibid.*, 6. Best would later find much in this view to agree with. See Lloyd Best, “Afterword: Making Mas with Possibility,” in George Lamming, ed., *Enterprise of the Indies* (Port of Spain: Trinidad and Tobago Institute of the West Indies, 1999), 294.

exhaustion when the Anglo-Creole nation-state project as a whole is evaporating as an intelligible framework for ideological cathexis and conceptual-political work.¹⁵ But historical moments of closure are often enough (when looked at through other lenses) moments of possibility, of opening. And in this regard for me, coming back to thinking about the Caribbean after a detour of several years working on and in Sri Lanka, the mid- to late 1990s mark a recognition (pathetically slow and inchoate, it is true) of something of an alteration in aspects of the conditions of Caribbean intellectual work. I returned to find what strikes me as a new generation of Caribbean intellectuals, a significant number of them women, a large number of them part of the Caribbean diasporas in the United States, Canada, and Britain that exploded in the 1970s and 1980s. Born a decade or so after me, this is a generation of Caribbeans who—unlike me—have not grown up inside of (and are therefore not *interpellated* by) the ideological imaginaries of the 1960s and 1970s; they are, by and large, a generation unfazed by the now graying, decidedly masculinist narrative of revolutionary heroism that seems to be never not re-staging accounts of the radical past's redemptive difference from the conservative present. And if their intellectual preoccupations are not shaped by the utopian hopes of earlier generations (the last anticolonial generation, the first postcolonial one), they are at the same time less constrained by the need to obsessively negotiate (like me) the scattered fragments of those generations' dreams of authenticity, emancipation, and self-determination. This is the generation of Caribbean intellectuals to whom *Small Axe* speaks and who have most clearly identified with—and contributed to—its project.

And now the Small Axe Collective is at yet another beginning, so to call it, another moment of departure, at once familiar and unfamiliar, filled as much with the fret of apprehension as with the pleasures of anticipation. . . . With this issue, *Small Axe* 28 (March 2009), we begin a relationship with a new publisher, Duke University Press. And with this new relationship we embark upon a number of initiatives, new directions that, in our view, widen and deepen the Small Axe Project.

In June 2008 *Small Axe* was awarded a modest grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in New York to support our initiative around the theme “Caribbean Visual Memory.” Many years ago the distinguished literary critic Edward Baugh offered a now famous reading of the Caribbean writer's quarrel with history.¹⁶ It is an essay that has entered into the very marrow of our literary-historical (and literary-political) imagination. Is there a comparable

15 I note, without comment, James Millette's observation: “The New World Group, in the short period of its existence, accomplished what no other organisation of its kind had accomplished before, or has accomplished since. In fact, as I look out these days on the barren intellectual, philosophical and political landscape of the Anglophone Caribbean I am always forced to stand in my shoes and to wonder what younger intellectuals are about and what are the prescriptions, if they have any, for today's Caribbean. This is notwithstanding the existence of *Small Axe* which is imitative of the intellectual and reflective analysis of the *New World Quarterly*, but innocent of the deliberate mission and the organizational cohesion of the New World Group.” James Millette, “Millette and the Rift in New World,” in Ryan, *Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom*, 176.

16 Eddie Baugh, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History,” *Tapia*, 20 February 1977, 6–7, 11.

quarrel among Caribbean visual practitioners? How does art remember? How, more specifically, does *Caribbean* art remember? And if there is an ideological (or anyway a constructed) dimension to what is remembered and what is not, what is the memory-politics of Caribbean art practice? How does the past figure in the present of Caribbean visual work? What are the objects, thematics, figurations, technologies, textures, gestures—what in effect is the aesthetic grammar—through which the past is constituted as a site of engagement for various generations of Caribbean colonial and postcolonial artists? These are some of the questions that animate our concern in this project. Each issue of the journal in 2009 will carry visual projects and art critical essays that speak to this theme.

Also in 2009, *Small Axe* will launch a literary competition for short fiction and poetry. Since our beginnings *Small Axe* has supported creative writing. The literary, we affirm, is one valued mode of the creative, critical imagination. In this endeavor we are especially keen to support and help cultivate the work of emerging Caribbean writers. Each year for the next three years—as a kind of pilot project—we will invite submissions in the registers of short fiction and poetry to our literary competition: see www.smallaxe.net for details. A panel of distinguished Caribbean writers will serve as judges, and the first- and second-prize winners in each category will be published in *Small Axe* in the following year.

Finally, beginning in 2010 *Small Axe* will initiate an inquiry into the state of history and the social sciences in Caribbean scholarly discourse. From its inception, of course, *Small Axe* has been committed to inter-disciplinarity. But it is easily shown that this inter-disciplinarity has tilted toward the literary-cultural studies. Part of the reason for this, obviously, is that the interpretive or linguistic or cultural turns in Caribbean studies have taken place, largely if not entirely, *from* literary studies (Sylvia Wynter, Kamau Brathwaite, and Gordon Rohlehr, for example), rather than, say, from the social sciences (in spite of the cultural idioms of Lloyd Best and Rex Nettleford) or history (the disciplinary interventions of Kamau Brathwaite notwithstanding). The social sciences and history have been less open to those critical modalities—call them postmodernist or poststructuralist, if you like—that have been about the business of questioning the relationship between language and foundations. What is the genealogy of this “resistance to theory” (as it used to be called)? *Small Axe* is concerned to engage this problem head-on, and consequently we are initiating two investigations—one into the state of contemporary debates in the social sciences, and the other into the state of debates in history and historiography. Our hope is to revivify the conversation about these scholarly domains: their interconnections, their contributions, their transformation, and their contemporary strategies of object-formation.

Beginnings are paradoxical; beginnings-again no less so. Beginnings *institute*, and doing so they presuppose intentions and offer us ends, however provisional; they project possibility, but they also open us to chance and contingency, and to opportunities only made visible in the

very act of beginning itself. For these last eleven-plus years the Small Axe Project has been beginning and beginning-again, initiating renewals that are simultaneously returns, departures that nevertheless carry with them the presences of the past—those of *New World Quarterly* and *Savacou*, say—that helped to make us what we are.

New York
November 2008