

Preface: *Small Axe* and the Ethos of Journal Work

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Insofar as it is a *project* and not merely a random venture, however professionally and personally rewarding and expertly executed, journal work is characterized by the activation and embodiment of an *ethos*. The essence of this ethos, I believe, is a reflexive spirit of intellectual *receptivity* and *generosity* that animates and motivates the collective commitment to the progressive enlargement of the overlapping circles of those—contributors, readers, interlocutors—who recognize themselves as being part of an ongoing moral, political, and cultural conversation. Thought about in this way, journal work is not only *not* an arbitrary undertaking, and it is certainly not simply the practice of putting competent scholarly articles into print (though that is avowedly its formal function); rather, it is distinctive for being an intellectual undertaking that is pursued with a certain horizon in mind, namely, the collective constitution of an imagined moral-intellectual community. I think of receptivity and generosity as being, separately and together, the moving spirits of the pursuit of this community because what journal work entails, above all, is less the ability to identify excellence, as such, than the cultivation of a capacity for attunement to the work of others, and a responsive ability to shelter and enable perspectives on common and uncommon themes that do not necessarily align with, indeed, that sometimes willfully diverge from, one's own.

I want to talk a little about aspects of this mode of being of projects and its distinctive ethos in relation to the journal work with which I've had the privilege of being associated, namely, *Small Axe*, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary and the publication of this,

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its fiftieth issue. I've never been a big fan of such public observances, it's true, but I'm going to make an exception here because of the intimate form of my familiarity with *Small Axe* and its presence in my overall idea of the virtues of an intellectual vocation. I once spoke of the "miracle" of *Small Axe*, deliberately echoing what Edward Baugh had said some time before of the great literary magazine of the anglophone Caribbean 1950s, *Bim*.¹ And after these many years, *Small Axe* still strikes me in exactly that way: a repeating surprise, a recurring *miracle*. It doesn't change, that experience of arresting wonder. With only slight embarrassment I'll freely admit that I still await the arrival of the advances of each successive issue of *Small Axe* as though it were the very first, with an indescribable mixture of anticipation and apprehension and . . . disbelief. And in fact, it is only when I actually hold the physical object in my two outstretched hands, reassured now by the receipt of the printed reality, that I allow myself to breathe a cautious and private sigh of relief.

When, in the company of a few fellow travelers, I initiated *Small Axe* in Kingston in 1996–97, many people said to me, confidentially and with my interest in view, that it would be at best a short-lived enterprise. It was grand, yes, ambitious even, but it wouldn't *last*. That was always the thing—it wouldn't last. Nothing like it did. The Caribbean is awash, they knowingly said, with well-intentioned initiatives that run aground *sooner* than later. In fact, nothing is more characteristic of Caribbean intellectual life than this penchant for starting new ventures that never have any chance whatsoever of reproducing themselves. And so on . . . Now, honestly, I never took these prophecies of doom to be expressions of ill will, of what Jamaicans lyrically call *badmindedness*—though of course they might well have been. After all, the truth is that *I* too was wondering, not because of a wavering or uncertain commitment on my part, needless to say, but as a matter, if you like, of thinking the future in the present. Beginnings are one thing, hard enough, to be sure. But what would "lasting" mean? What would be the point at which *Small Axe* could be said to have "lasted"? These were, in part, abstract questions (in any case, I brushed them aside) because although I was always self-conscious of seeking something larger in the *Small Axe* initiative (remember, *New World Quarterly* and *Savacou* were the models I had before me, and they styled themselves as expressions of "movements"), I was at that early point literally *feeling* my way from one issue of the journal to the next. And from the haphazard and chaotic inside of each of these issues, encountering and resolving their specific challenges, it was impossible to discern what they would add up to—whether the shape of something more than the sum of all the issues put together would emerge from within what we were anyway carrying on with.

One way of describing what happened, I think, is that along the way *Small Axe* became a project. Now, in my view, a project is only a project by virtue of the fact that it is *projected*; and it is projected, as can only be the case with projects, from the *inside out* toward a horizon. This

1 See David Scott, "Preface: The Paradox of Beginnings," *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): vii–xiv; and Edward Baugh, "Frank Collymore and the Miracle of *Bim*," *New World Quarterly* 3, nos. 1–2 (Dead Season 1966/Croptime 1967): 129–33.

is the direction of the vector of a project. A project, I mean to say, can't be driven, let alone sustained, from a place *outside* itself (a place like a professional organization); to the contrary, it is always driven and sustained from an internally generative source of values and preoccupations. Thus, a project is responsive first and foremost to itself, to its own evolving vision, its own idiosyncrasies, its own forms of discontent and irritation. The authenticity of a project, I believe, its singularity as the expression of a moral-intellectual ideal, depends almost entirely on the integrity of this inside, the sense of purpose and vocation it articulates and professes. This is partly why projects are always works in progress. They are never finished, never fully formed. They do not really know what "fully formed" could mean. Each instantiation of a project is only a provisional realization of an inspiration that is at once formed *enough* to give guidance and also open *enough* to allow room for change and transformation. A project never knows itself in advance; its personality only gradually *discloses* itself within the very work it does.

Jamaican people say, one-one cocoa fill a basket. So at what point did *Small Axe* become as much or *more* about the idea of the basket than about each of the individual cocoas that have gone into filling it? I've asked myself this question over and over again. And yet somehow there did come a time when, without preparation or warning, without a self-conscious decision having been made, we knew we were in the middle of a different moment, in which the periodical publishing platform could now be described not only in relation to its material and thematic specificities but also (and I believe more profoundly) as the expression of the vision of an intellectual and artistic project. I do not know the date of this transition, though I now recognize it to have been an important one in the relatively short life of *Small Axe*.

That a journal project grows out of a generative center does not imply that this center should be thought of as a stable, omniscient fulcrum, a permanent, unchanging point of departure and return. This would suggest a moribund project. But it does imply that the *mode of change* of a project is distinctive. Not surprisingly change grows from the inside out, responsive not only to deliberative reasons but also to unforeseen contingencies that change the conditions of our conversation (like the move from the University of the West Indies Press to Indiana University Press in 2001 that shifted the geopolitical locus of our work and the demographic of our potential community). It seems to me that a characteristic feature of such projects is that, from the inside, what you are capable of making at any given moment is partly a function of what you have already made with what you already have. But each iteration of making—each issue of the journal, let's say—is not a repetition of the one before. Or, it is not *merely* a repetition. It is a repetition that implies a difference. Each iteration, each issue of the journal, alters slightly the terrain of possibility, shifts, however minimally, the angle from which you can see, so that what emerges is a contrast, small enough to make for continuity but large enough to bring into view what you had not quite seen before, or seen not quite in the same way (like the way book "reviews" enabled us to see the possibilities in book "discussions"). In this sense, change grows organically, unevenly, out of an agonistic relation between what you

can make and what you have found. Change grows through the tension between the project understood as a perpetual question and the quotidian editorial demands involved in realizing the successful publication of each issue.

And it is in this context, I believe, that the virtues of receptivity and generosity play a crucial dynamic role in shaping a project. Let us say that, essentially, the project of *Small Axe* consists of rethinking the Caribbean. Of course, we are aware of always entering and inhabiting an already-existing field of debate about the Caribbean, and that we need to continuously pose self-reflexive questions such as, What is the current conjuncture in which the Caribbean emerges as a question worth answering? Or, What are the questions through which, in the current conjuncture, the Caribbean in its multiplicities can be brought into focus? And because we are animated by the priority of the problem-space of *questions*, we draw away as much as possible from the conceit that we already know the best paths to pursue. Openness here is not sentimentality; it is a moral and cognitive imperative. To grow out from within, from where we *anyway* find ourselves, entails a critical attitude (to sustain the judgments we make), but it entails a *listening* one as well (that encourages receptivity to new kinds of work, new kinds of voices). What we value are the dialogical pleasures of *thinking-with-others*. In this sense, a submission received is always a welcome invitation to reflect on someone else's work in the context of the horizon of our project. The concern is not only whether the work has scholarly qualities but whether it poses a question to us about who and what we are as a project, one that potentially clarifies and widens the self-consciousness of what it means to engage in the work we do.

For making this leg of the journey with me possible I would like to thank all those who have worked with us, in any capacity. You know who you are. And you also know, without my having to say, how invaluable your contributions have been. *Small Axe* is a function of a collective purpose and endeavor. We are all implicated. The challenges over the next twenty years will be as many, undoubtedly, as those of the past. They will oblige us to ask ourselves unsettling questions about what we think we're about; what, in effect, the project is. To these contingencies there will be no ready-made responses. But what perhaps is certain is that we cannot imagine being able to meet these challenges in any worthwhile measure unless we continue to strive to bring to them that ethos of receptivity and generosity that has so seasoned our purposes to this point; unless, that is, we remain open to learning how to learn from our interlocutors (sympathetic or not) about what we thought we already knew about ourselves and the journal work we've undertaken. To my mind, this posture of a reflexive and responsive intellectual openness, by no means a seamlessly easy one to stimulate or maintain, is the single most important ingredient in the progressive widening of the overlapping circles of those who might be encouraged to recognize themselves as participants in the community we call *Small Axe*.

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