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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 book discussions.

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# Preface: Facing the Literary

**David Scott**

Every negro walk in a circle. Take that and make of it what you will.  
—Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women*

What do we do when we *face* the literary?

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that we are facing Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*, the second novel of a young writer whose art has the graphic urgency of outraged violation and the ripe odor of perspiring black bodies. And let us say that we are facing that moment in the novel's arc when the story's end is upon us: Homer and the rest of the Night Women have carried into action their daring—and doomed—plan of destroying the regime of slavery, and have, in turn, been destroyed by the plantation's powers of vengeance and violence. Only Lilith has ambiguously survived. The narrative voice reflects:

Every negro walk in a circle. Take that and make of it what you will. But sometimes when a negro die and another negro take him place, even if that negro not be blood, they still fall in step with the same circle. The same circle of living that no nigger can choose and dying that come at any time. Perhaps nigger take things as they be for what used to be will always be what is. Maybe it better for backra and nigger that things go back to what people think is the best way until the fire next time. White man sleep with one eye open, but black man can never sleep.<sup>1</sup>

What is the attitude of regard and anticipation, and perhaps also of desire and submission, that we assume when we face the burdensome experience of this figured reality of New World plantation slavery? What of ourselves, our doubts, our fears, our hopes do we share, do we yield, do we keep; what changes in us, what remains the same, in the semiotic interaction

<sup>1</sup> Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 411.

that constitutes our literary experience of this past and its terrors? What raced and gendered practices of agonism and fellowship, what dimensions of filiative memory and identity, are brought into being; what games of truth are enacted, what pressures of authority are brought to bear, when the literary language of James's slave narrative works on and through us?

To be sure, these are not novel sorts of questions. They are old, even perennial obsessions for intelligent readers and writers alike. But there are times and places, arguably, when they come to haunt our "social imaginaries" more acutely, more urgently, than at others; when they seem to demand, impatiently, impetuously, something more from us than the blandishments of our complacent attention—when they demand, like the Night Women, our creative and *engaged* response. Such, perhaps, are times when the enchantments of an older literary language (with its now conventional stock of images) have faded, when the idioms in which we have, for a generation or more, encountered our (imagined) selves, or tried out new ones, have lost the capacity to surprise us, to awaken in us new and unfamiliar compulsions, new and unfamiliar ways of connecting our remembered pasts to our anticipated futures—such are times when we are in search of fresh literary luminosity, a fresh sense of literary experience. I wonder whether ours isn't such a time and our Caribbean such a place?

This, anyway, is our working intuition. And this is why *Small Axe* has launched a literary competition for new writers. Our goal is simple. We aim to provide a platform for writers of poetry and fiction beginning to make their way, and whose work, though eminently worthy, has yet to be adequately acknowledged. From our beginnings *Small Axe* has taken the literary arts seriously, publishing poetry and fiction (and drama) as often as we have been able. But we now endeavor to go further, to help to cultivate a more productive, a more generative, a more supportive relation to young writers and new writing.

In this issue we are pleased to publish the winners of our inaugural literary competition—two poets, Monica Minott and Tanya Shirley, and two writers of fiction, Ashley Rousseau and Alake Pilgrim—in whose work there is a welcome glimmer of the future in the present.

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