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.
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Reaching for the Border

Charles V. Carnegie

If I could make the border
Then I would step across
Simply take me to the border
No matter what the cost
—Gregory Isaacs

Borders, one might say, are always there: produced in the very acts of linguistic classification that give meaning to things. Contingent though essential accompaniments to centers, they are created by means of differentiation and naming. Borders, moreover, occur in a relational field where they abut and overlap with the boundaries of other proliferating centers. And it is at these points of intersection and by virtue of their in-betweeness—being neither this nor that—that borders, and the liminal beings who occupy them, take on special social significance in their own right. The ritual recognition accorded the unclassified—the associations of danger, pollution, and taboo that they engender; the circumspection, derision, and vilification they attract—attest to their social import. However, borders and borderlands offer as well spaces, moments, points of vantage from which centers in all of their assumed, powerful normativity can be critically examined, rethought, and contested.

It may be that the border’s transgressive, oppositional significance is more apparent to some than to others (holding out the prospect of escape for the slave or the incarcerated, for example, or of self-reinvention for the marginalized) and gains heightened salience at particular times and historical moments than others. Borders summon when centers oppress more relentlessly or else when centers begin to crumble. The present it appears is such a moment. At these moments border crossings are perhaps more appealing and
more frequent, and border-work—the act of writing, representing, and theorizing the border—becomes imperative. Newly awakened interest in the displacement of centers, and the invention of and reliance on concepts for talking about mixture, blending, the joining of distinct locations, and the crossing of boundaries—transnationalism, creolization, translation, routes, hybridity, diaspora, borderlands—are some of the indicators of the border-work going on apace for the past decade and more. This is not to say that the concepts or the practices they seek to describe are inherently counterhegemonic, but that they can be made so.¹ A renewed sense of the salience of a black internationalism, nowadays more often referred to as a black diaspora, and scholarly interest in finding ways to understand and represent its dynamic, are part and parcel of this border-work.²

Caribbean borders have been particularly charged sites historically, lying as they did at the edges of competing empires: their significance marked by piracy, contraband, marronage, the production of people of intermediate (mestizo) or unclassifiable “race,” and the invention of new languages from older language stocks. (Curious, isn’t it, the displacement, the disallowance in their time of all these border traces?) I suggest that the artful negotiation of borders that has long gone on in the Caribbean deserves greater scholarly attention than it has so far received.³ The border savvy of Caribbean peoples, and the border activity in which they engage, constitute important veins of historical knowledge and cultural practice that get displaced by a racial/national optic made normative by the colonial and postcolonial state. Instances of the dexterity, versatility, and matter-of-factness with which Caribbean peoples put their border savvy to work include: passing—the phenomenon whereby literally and figuratively, individually and in groups, people alter their racial status cross-generationally through marriage or education, and so-called “free-colored” populations might align themselves now with black, now with white, sociopolitical interests; interracial commercial and other alliances; the neutralizing or alteration of the meaning of racial terms (as, for example in turning the negative “negro”/“negre” into a neutral term, the equivalent of “fellow,” in Puerto

1. Shalini Puri, for example, notes instances in which the state has appropriated the discourse of creolization and cautions wisely against ahistorical generalizations as to the liberatory potentiality of these border phenomena in The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). See discussion in this issue of Small Axe.
Rican Spanish or Martinican French);⁴ and the common practices of cross-border mar-
ronage and interisland huckstering. It is time we woke up to the fact that the singular
tragedy of young Lee Malvo’s border-crossing career is paralleled by countless other, if
not quite so dramatic, instances that our scholarly triangulations have not prepared us
adequately to grasp.

But why in the larger scheme of things should it matter the dexterity displayed, the
understandings and misunderstandings reached, the tragedies small and large experi-
enced on the borders of the Caribbean? Because they might allow us to better assess
the cosmopolitan stirrings of the past; to imagine differently the political possibilities of
the present; and to participate more deliberately in a conceptual rethinking of political
community for our global future.

Caribbean borderlands have long served as crucibles of internationalism and cos-
mpolitan identification. Yet these fertile spaces of interchange continue to be under-
researched and undertheorized. In his extraordinary book tracing some of the translin-
guistic conversations and exchanges that contributed hugely to a black internationalism
centering on Paris in the early decades of the twentieth century, Brent Hayes Edwards
sketches among others the biographies of Paulette Nardal and Jane Nardal, two of seven
sisters from an educated black Martinican family whose contributions to the founding
of the Négritude movement have been generally neglected until recently. Edwards dem-
onstrates how through their writing, translations, the journals they helped found and
edit, the constellation of intellectuals from different countries they brought into contact
with each other, and the hospitality of their Paris home, the Nardals played a significant
role in engendering transnational black diaspora dialogue. In all of this, though, it is the
Parisian milieu that gets foregrounded.

However, Edwards notes in passing that in the years before she went to study in
Paris, “Paulette Nardal began her higher education at the Colonial College for Girls
in Martinique and then spent some time in the British West Indies to perfect her Eng-
lish.”⁵ We aren’t told to which English-speaking island she went, the circumstances of
her getting there, or the intellectual connections she may have formed. Yet such interis-
land movement among young people of the up-and-coming middle class in the Eastern
Caribbean was quite commonplace in the early decades of the twentieth century. Their

⁴. See Mervyn C. Alleyne, The Construction and Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World
(Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002).
⁵. Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora, 154. See the discussion of this work in Small Axe 17 (March
2005): 100–49.
holiday weekend boat trips to attend social events in neighboring islands were sometimes reported in the local press, for example. No doubt marriages, political and business alliances, and many lifelong friendships blossomed as a result of such contact. Or, going back to the 1880s and 1890s, we see outlined in Faith Smith’s *Creole Recitations* the transatlantic social and intellectual environment in which that most original Caribbean intellectual, John Jacob Thomas—the subject of Smith’s remarkable work of intellectual history—operated, and the intra-Caribbean, French Creole circuit of islands in which ideas and people circulated freely.⁶

Surely metropolitan sites like Paris, New York, and London have served as important catalysts for the development of black internationalism. They have provided, for example, an infrastructure of communication and finance to support ventures like newspaper and magazine publishing not easily available in the colonies, a critical mass of black sojourners from far-flung places, and the multiple alienations of race, gender, and class that served to heighten these immigrants’ collective political awareness. Yet their formation into internationalists and cosmopolitans may first begin and become considerably advanced elsewhere—and even in the absence of travel—in Caribbean port towns that have been global for centuries, but which we now tend to overlook. It is worth remembering that Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was born first in Kingston before being reborn in New York. Nowadays, as in the past, people cross the national and language frontiers of the Caribbean all the time under the radar screen of the state. To adequately theorize the formation and practice of a black diaspora requires the ethnography of nonmetropolitan sites that were and are part of the diasporic circuit; requires, moreover, that we get at the voices and experiences not just of literary and political figures but of the anonymous and unlettered who provide them with community and succor.

After decades of talk of closer regional collaboration, economic integration, and, less frequently, political union, the endless meetings have produced position papers by the ream and numerous signed agreements but proportionately little in the way of tangible results.⁷ The political leaders and state functionaries who deliberate on these matters begin firmly planted in the illusionary land of state-centeredness and are generally heedless, or else fearful, of the border crossings that have drawn their peoples over the years into ever-tightening webs of familiarity. The intra-Caribbean migration trajectories of

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⁷ Patsy Lewis, in *Surviving Small Size: Regional Integration in Caribbean Ministates* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), offers a useful overview of these efforts.
working class people in particular are not viewed in terms of how they might help with conceiving, conceptualizing, and imagining a more closely integrated Caribbean but instead are regarded with anxiety.

Caribbean border practices have figured little if at all in the imagination and organization of regional polities. With good reason, many Caribbean nationalisms privileged “race” in their anticolonial struggles. Yet the region’s social history may be viewed as no less concerned with racial critique as with racial assertion and vindication. By adopting as normative a racialized discourse in the post-independence era, then, by not seeking to undermine the validity of the discursive categories of race, Caribbean states are drawing selectively on their pasts. And their choices may be seen to endorse unwittingly a larger global racial hegemony that continues to marginalize entire countries, regions, and populations as lesser members of humankind. A deliberate distancing from the strategic essentialism of the past may now be needed, in other words, to deal more appropriately with the conditions of the present. Race and nation, paradoxical legacies of enlightened humanism, are now well understood for their conceptual inadequacy. But to arrive at postracial, postnational imaginaries of belonging calls in part for the rediscovery of oppositional antecedents such as can be found in the borderlands of places like the Caribbean.⁸

The Small Axe project offers a platform for enabling conversation across the intra-Caribbean borders of linguistic and cultural differences instated by colonialism and reinforced by subsequent political movements. As our call for papers noted:

While the language divide . . . has been treated by Caribbean scholars and politicians as paramount, there are countless examples of language barriers being surmounted by the movements of ordinary people and their cultural adaptations and inventions, historically and in the present. The creation of the plena musical genre in the multicultural plantation milieu of early 20th-century Puerto Rico, the transplantation of the Haitian vaudou and rara processionals to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, inter-island marronage and other historical forms of border transgression, and the present-day trafficking of Dominican sex workers to Haiti, St. Martin, and Antigua are all significant human bridges across the Caribbean’s linguistic boundaries.

With a view to stimulating further inquiry, thought, and perhaps new imaginaries, then, border crossings are the special focus of this issue of Small Axe.

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