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: Diasporas of the Imagination

David Scott

This issue of *Small Axe* distributes its preoccupations across three topical sections, each with its own semiotic coherence but meeting and crossing the others at an intersection that one might well call “diasporas of the imagination.”

The first section, guest-edited by Glyne Griffith, consists of essays presented at the conference “Blackness Unbound,” which Griffith organized for the Small Axe Collective at the University at Albany, State University of New York, 28–29 September 2007. This was, in fact, the third—and last—in a series of intellectual occasions (made possible through the generosity of the Ford Foundation) in which the Small Axe Collective was concerned to stimulate a conversation about the conditions of production of Caribbean knowledges (including knowledges of and about the Caribbean), and the various—and variously—global worlds in which what constitutes the Caribbean is constructed and negotiated, and resisted and transformed. Each of these occasions was, needless to say, exploratory and open-ended. And deliberately so. They were tentative conversations . . . provisional . . . searching . . . interventions that looked to challenge what we thought we already knew about ourselves and others.

The first of these events, a self-consciously thinking-out-loud occasion we called “Diasporic Knowledges: Caribbean Inflections and African American Conversations,” was held 7–9 April 2005 at Brown University, where we were hosted by Anthony Bogues and the Department of Africana Studies. In this seminar we sought to focus our attention on the contexts of Caribbean intellectual presence in the US academy. While the late 1960s and early 1970s were by no means the only or even the earliest such context of Caribbean/African American crossing, we were particularly interested in the moment when the emergence of black studies
on US campuses provided an institutional setting in which scholars from the Caribbean found an intellectual home in the United States. And one very fertile point of such crossing, one that we hope to see systematic work on in the near future, was that of the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, through which many Caribbean intellectuals passed and spoke and exchanged ideas on their formations and their projects. Memorably, C. L. R. James’s lectures on *The Black Jacobins* were delivered there in the summer of 1971. It seems to me that this is just one of the as yet insufficiently examined connections between black and communist radicalisms on US campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the development and character of Black Power and Marxism in the Caribbean.

The second occasion, “Archaeologies of Black Memory,” a seminar and workshop, was held 21–29 June 2007 in conjunction with Caribbean Literary Studies at the University of Miami and was meant to provide a platform on which to interrogate an ensemble of themes and concerns connecting the criticism of the African Americas in two of its postemancipation formations: the regional Caribbean and the mainland United States. Our aim was to foreground the crucial register of memory and the memory-practices by means of which the past is remembered, documented, circulated, and made available for the labor of intellectual and artistic work in the present. At the heart of such practices, we thought, must be the assembly of the very sources and bases—an archive—without which no memory-work whatsoever can take place. Our suspicion was that given our particular histories of black disenfranchisement, what those sources are and what analytics and poetics are required to make them visible is not self-evident, and therefore stands in need of explicit, critical exploration. Two distinguished Caribbean scholars, Gordon Rohlehr and Robert Hill, each with a different but equally profound connection to a specific archive of memory, anchored our discussions.

The symposium “Blackness Unbound” sought to extend and deepen these critical conversations about diaspora by adding new voices from various New World elsewhere, new conundrums of racial subjectification and racial identity and agency, and new perspectives from which to think comparatively about the spatiality and temporality of New World black experience. The obvious implication is that there is no single way of being black. But this is not to say that “blackness” is merely socially constructed—as the cliché goes. That is the sort of truism that, replayed ad nauseam, now masks as much as it illuminates. What is more important to grasp, surely, are what one might call the differential looping effects of racial subjectification, the varied ways in which the historical technologies of racial formation in the Americas make up black subjects and make them up in ways that render them both recognizable and unrecognizable to each other, both convergent with and divergent from each other. What are the historical ontologies of our racial selves? What are the varied unstable

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2 Material from this event subsequently appeared in *Small Axe,* no. 26 (June 2008), and *Anthurium* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2008).
truths by which we constitute ourselves as racial objects of authoritative knowledge? What are the mobile powers by which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting upon ourselves and upon others? What is the ethics by which we constitute ourselves as moral agents of our historical time? The job of work performed by the various essays published in the “Blackness Unbound” section of this issue of Small Axe is to suggest the critical idiom in which some of these questions can be productively approached.

Together these three symposia mark an important juncture in our history: in the twelve-year history of the journal Small Axe and indeed of the Small Axe Project as a whole. They mark a moment of considerable expansion of our range of preoccupations and of the range of voices that inhabit our evolving discursive community.

In the second section of this issue, “Visual Memory,” we continue our interest (initiated in Small Axe 28 [March 2009] and enabled through the generosity of the Andy Warhol Foundation) in the place of memory in Caribbean visual practice. Clearly, memory and imagination (here, visual imagination) are closely connected, each feeding—and feeding of—the other. In this issue we feature the art of Albert Chong (in which memory works through a familial vocabulary and personal objects), Andrea Chung (in which the art of remembrance is presented in an idiom of absence), and Ras Akyem-i Ramsay (in which memorial figuration is attached to a mythical and perhaps even mystical episteme). For these artists, notably, the materials of memory are never estranged from the ordinary travails of making work and making life. We also feature art historical essays from Veerle Poupeye and Allison Thompson—the former thinking about the relationship between visual representation and social crisis in Jamaica, the latter considering the diasporic visual practice of Sonia Boyce, in particular her video construction of the Barbados festival Crop Over.

Finally, in the third section of this issue, our now familiar book discussion section, we engage Richard Price’s recent Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination. A prolific and distinguished anthropologist of the African Americas, Price has been at the center of a wide variety of debates that have shaped our contemporary understanding of the making of New World slave and post-slave societies and cultures. In particular, of course, he has been much interested in the relation between memory and historical imagination in the African Americas, widely conceived. Recall in his seminal book First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People the vivid formulation of the problem of the past in the present of the African Americas: “There was a day in time,” Price, in his opening epigraph, quotes Jorge Luis Borges as saying, “when the last eyes to see Christ closed forever.”3 When the last eyes to see a slave brought from Africa closed forever, the problem of the African past in the Caribbean present became, inexorably, one of diasporic imagination and vision and memory. We seek in hosting this discussion of Price—engaged here by Kenneth Bilby, Aisha Khan, and Deborah Thomas, prominent Caribbeanist anthropologists in their own right—to

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Contribute to the development of a critical exploration of the construction of the Caribbean as an object of anthropological inquiry.

Perhaps you can just about glimpse some of the senses in which the three sections of this issue of Small Axe work their intimations and inquiries through a shared diasporic ethos of historical imagination. From within their distinctive locations of field and their contingent juxtapositions of theme—racial subjectification in the New World, memorial figuration in Caribbean visual practice, historical consciousness in the African Americas—each connects to the others through the liminal shadow of those powers of displacement (geopolitical, ideological, aesthetic) by which identity and community have historically been constructed, and resisted, in our Caribbean.

New York—London, March 2009