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.

This issue of Small Axe is dedicated to the memory of Rex Nettleford (3 February 1933–2 February 2010), a spirit without category, and one of the truly great creative minds of our late modern time.
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On Friday, 4 September 2009, the minister of government responsible for the Advisory Committee on the Prerogative of Mercy under the Constitution of Grenada advised the governor general to effect the release from the Richmond Hill Prison of (among others) the last members of the Grenada 17—namely, Dave Bartholomew, Callistus Bernard, Bernard Coard, Leon Cornwall, Liam James, Ewart Layne, and Selwyn Strachan. They had been in prison for more than a quarter of a century for their alleged role in the deaths of then prime minister Maurice Bishop and his colleagues at Fort Rupert (now, again, Fort George) on 19 October 1983, undoubtedly the darkest day in modern Caribbean political history.

The release of these seven political prisoners brought to an end the long and difficult judicial battle of the Grenada 17 to have their 1986 murder convictions overturned. The Grenada 17 had always acknowledged their moral and political implication in the events that led to the deaths of 19 October but not their criminal responsibility. They had, moreover, long protested the gross irregularities of the ideologically motivated prosecutorial process that found them guilty of murder (the torture by which confessions were extracted, the unconstitutionality of the “court of necessity” in which they were tried, the withholding of documents needed to support their defense, the dependence on obviously flawed witnesses, and so on).¹ However, on 7 February 2007, at least one dimension of their fight to vindicate themselves was realized when the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council impugned the constitutional validity of the original death sentences of the thirteen appellants named in the appeal and advised that they

¹ For a firsthand account, see Callistus Bernard, They Could Only Kill Me Once (London: Hibiscus, 2006).
be resentenced by the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court. Their lordships pointedly observed, “For obvious reasons, the question of the appellants’ fate is so politically charged that it is hardly reasonable to expect any Government of Grenada, even 23 years after the tragic events of October 1983, to take an objective view of the matter. In their Lordships’ opinion that makes it all the more important that the determination of the appropriate sentence for the appellants, taking into account such progress as they have made in prison, should be the subject of a judicial determination.”

As the seven men emerged from the now-automated gates of the nineteenth-century prison nestled in the hills above St. George’s, local and regional journalists were keen to know from them—and especially from Bernard Coard, supposedly the mastermind of the conflict that had led to the catastrophe of 19 October—what they had learned from their long incarceration, whether they had changed in their perception of their actions, whether they now had a different account to give of the terrible events that had brought them to this point. Was this questioning innocence or presumption? Was it the familiar elision and disavowal that so marks and mars modern Caribbean politics? For the real question, it seems to me, is what we—Caribbeans as a whole—have learned in the twenty-six years since the collapse of the Grenada Revolution and the US invasion that followed in its wake. How have we changed? Are we in a better position, today, with the blurring and weakening of the lines of cleavage and antagonism that characterized the Cold War, to appreciate what moral and political demand was answered by our desire to convict and punish the Grenada 17 on the clearly bogus evidence produced by the prosecution at their trial? Are we in a better position, today, to gauge in retrospect what regional anxiety, what wounded fantasy of sovereignty, was assuaged by so egregious a travesty of justice? Are we in a better position, today, to acknowledge the senses in which the Grenada 17 might really have been hostages to our own political hypocrisy and shallow opportunism, scapegoats, in effect, upon whom we projected the rage and resentment of our compromised will-to-power?

The collapse of the Grenada Revolution is among the most traumatic events in recent Caribbean political history. Who knows just how deep the scars. It may be obscure how or whether we—Caribbeans—will ever recover completely from its effects. But it is certain that we will never gain a critical perspective on that imprisoned past unless we are willing to try to unlearn the presumption that the first responsibility to change lies elsewhere than in ourselves.

London–New York, December 2009

2 The thirteen named in the appeal were Bernard Coard, Callistus Bernard, Lester Redhead, Christopher Stroude, Hudson Austin, Liam James, Leon Cornwall, John Ventour, Dave Bartholomew, Ewart Layne, Colville McBarnette, Selwyn Strachan, and Cecil Prime. Phyllis Coard was not named because she had been granted leave in 2000 to seek medical treatment in Jamaica. And the soldiers accused of being directly involved in the killing and who had initially been convicted of manslaughter—Vincent Joseph, Andy Mitchell, and Cosmos Richardson—had already been freed on 2 December 2006, after their sentences were reduced for industriousness and good behavior. At the resentencing on 27 June 2007, Justice Francis Belle of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court ordered the release of Prime, Redhead, and Stroude. And on 18 December 2008, Austin, McBarnette, and Ventour were released.