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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 reimaged. 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 Richard Hart (13 August 1917–21 December 2013), solicitor, politician, and historian, a man of great warmth, courage, and generosity who was devoted to truth and virtue in politics, to radical social change, and to the idea that historical knowledge must always be in the service of popular understanding. He will be missed.

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Preface: Debt, Redress

David Scott

The death of Nelson Mandela on Thursday, 5 December 2013, will undoubtedly invite, provoke, many different sorts of discussion about his legacy, in particular the meaning of his political life for the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, but also his significance for the contemporary world at large. Certainly one of the issues that his passing will call into renewed critical debate is that of the unresolved ambiguities surrounding the ethics and politics of redress and reconciliation. By the time of his death, it is generally agreed, Mandela had become a universal symbol of forgiveness for historical injustice. Because here was a man whose people had been dispossessed and brutalized, and who personally had suffered cruelly for his commitment to fighting his oppressors, and who was able and willing, nevertheless, to extend forgiveness to those who had trespassed against him and against his people. Mandela appeared to embody in his person and personality the sublime spirit of the new age of reconciliation. He redeemed the racial sins of white South Africans; and he solicited from blacks a willingness to forsake revenge, to relinquish political violence, and to look beyond the ugly, divisive past toward the prospect of equal citizenship in a free and democratic South Africa. It is an unequalled achievement. And yet, of course, there were always those—and not only people who spoke angrily of his betrayal, who raised against him the haunting figures of Robert Sobukwe or Stephen Biko, but many less ideologically motivated people with an equal share in the suffering and sacrifice of the Struggle era—who had a doubt, who wondered poignantly, sometimes aloud, whether there was not some sleight-of-hand at work in the poetics and politics of reconciliation, whether in the settlement shaped by Mandela, in admittedly constrained circumstances, something had not been yielded by the enemies of justice *in order* that even more could be

retained by them, whether something precious had not been lost even as so much of value was gained. Redress, here, in the very exemplary instance of it, seems mired in *paradox*.

For us Caribbeans, I believe, there is an important cautionary lesson to be extracted from the trying conundrums of the ongoing search for reparatory justice for the apartheid past. In recent years in the Caribbean there has been a growing intellectual and political momentum around the question of repair for the historical injustice of the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself, signaled by the recent announcement that the regional organization CARICOM will be seeking reparations from Britain, France, and the Netherlands through the International Court of Justice in The Hague.¹ I believe this is an issue of enormous moral, legal, and political importance, one that intellectuals and artists as well as the wider public should be engaged in debating—not only as an instrumental matter of how best to win the legal battle for compensation but also as a matter of thinking through the question of the moral grounds and justifications for slave redress.² In his recent book *Britain's Black Debt*, Hilary Beckles, one of the leading figures in what is being called the Caribbean reparations movement, offers the first comprehensive account of the argument for the just repair both of the genocide of the native population of the region, the first casualties of the catastrophe of European colonization, as well as of the transatlantic trade in Africans and their enslavement in the Caribbean.³ The first part of the book is a summary of various aspects of the British colonial project in the Caribbean, delineating in turn the deliberate extermination of the indigenous population; the scale and character of the enslavement of Africans; the direct and deep involvement of the British royal family and the British state in slave trading and slave owning; the spectacular enrichment of not only generations of British individuals but also the civic, religious, and educational institutions and built environment of modern British society as a whole; and, finally, the disbursement of the 20 million pounds the British state made available in compensation to the slave owners for their loss of property at the time of abolition. The second part of the book, in some ways more interesting because the story it tells is less well known, recounts the efforts, over a number of years and among a remarkable group of people, to generate regional and international support for a slave reparations movement—from the various Pan-Africanist initiatives (in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1993, and in Gorée Island, Senegal, in 2001), to the deep learning curve that was the Durban conference in 2001 and the mobilization within the Caribbean region itself among state officials, civil society groupings, and scholars.⁴ To my mind *Britain's Black Debt* is an important intervention and one that it will be necessary to critically engage.

1 On the recent announcement by the Caribbean Community and Common Market, see www.caricom.org/jsp/pressreleases/press_releases_2013/pres201_13.jsp (accessed 18 December 2013).

2 See David Scott, "Soul Captives Are Free," *Small Axe*, no. 23 (June 2007): v–x; and "The Moral Justification of Reparations for New World Slavery," in Robert Nichols and Jakeet Singh, eds., *Freedom and Democracy in an Imperial Context: Dialogues with James Tully* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 100–120.

3 Hilary McD. Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2013). Beckles is the chair of the CARICOM Regional Reparations Commission.

4 See also the account in Anthony Gifford, *The Passionate Advocate* (Kingston: Arawak, 2007), chaps. 20 and 21; and Dudley Thompson, "The Debt Has Not Been Paid. The Account Has Not Been Settled," www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i4a4.htm (accessed 18 December 2013).

What Beckles does not talk about in his book, however, perhaps in view of its particular motivations and preoccupations, is the contemporary regional and global *conjuncture* in which reparations appears increasingly to be a compelling language of political criticism and mobilization. How might we more adequately *situate* the rise of a politics and poetics of reparations in order to better clarify what is at stake in it, what story of the past is being linked to what demand in the present and what imagination of the future? Is there something about the regional and global present that shapes and orients and gives point to the new argument about Caribbean slave reparations? For, after all, it might well be wondered why it has taken nearly half a century of postcolonial politics to arrive at these arguments and organized demands.⁵ Reparations as moral-politics is interesting not merely because it is right as a matter of principle (whatever that might mean) but because it is *timely* as a mode of responsiveness to a particular conjuncture.

On the one hand, perhaps there is a sense in the regional Caribbean that the developmentalist model of the postcolonial nation-state—whether enacted through liberal-national or socialist-national ideologies—has arrived, exhausted, at a dead end. Inaugurated inside the nationalist movements in the years following the Second World War, this was a heroic model of anticolonial sovereignty that depended on the idea that the new nation-state could progressively transcend the colonial past, leave it behind, on its way to a liberated, independent future. True, economic aid would be necessary to finance the development project, but this was conceived in good faith on the principle of sovereign equality between client and lender. By contrast there is now a widespread sense in the region that this model has only further crippled the economies of Caribbean nation-states, driven them deeper into the proverbial “debt-trap,” and hobbled their prospects for political self-determination and meaningful sovereignty. Might it be, then, that one of the things that the reparations argument *potentially* does is to redescribe the past’s relation to the present in such a way as to foreground the sense in which Caribbean debt is the other side of European *theft*—that the “persistent poverty” of the Caribbean has been a constituting condition for *ill-gotten* European prosperity? The two—the debt and the theft—are internally, not accidentally, connected. The point is that this is not the story of a mere episode in a marginal history; it is the integrated story of the making of the modern world *itself*. What the Caribbean politics of reparations seeks, therefore, is not economic aid (with all its disciplining technologies and moral hubris), not help in the subservient sense of a mendicant seeking assistance, but what is *owed* to the Caribbean by former slave-trading and slave-owning nations as a matter of the justice of redress.

On the other hand, in more global terms, perhaps there is something about the post-Cold War rise of a new normative ethical-political idiom for thinking about the relationship between historical wrongs and the contemporary demands for repair that offers novel conditions of

5 In her important book *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), discussed in this issue, Deborah Thomas urges the virtues of a “reparations framework” for rethinking social transformation. But she does not historicize its conditions of possibility.

political possibility.⁶ This is, broadly speaking, the language of reparatory (as opposed to punitive or redistributive) justice that is part of the larger human rights “revolution.” As a number of people have noted, reparatory justice is a conception of justice made for a world in which the idea of the revolutionary overcoming of the past is no longer viable as a way of thinking futurity. Reparatory justice responds, in other words, to a *retemporalization* of history; it attunes itself to a *reenchanted* past understood as a time not yet past that continues to disfigure the present and foreclose the future. It is perhaps this revised temporal sensibility that has made the language of trauma—and the memory-work that sustains it—so arresting for thinking about the persistence of harms resulting from the perpetration of historical wrongs. And it is also, perhaps, what drives, as a corollary or a condition of reparatory justice, the idea of reconciliation and political forgiveness—which brings us back to Nelson Mandela, the very embodiment of this idea and its ethos. Now note that the idea of political forgiveness presupposes an *acknowledgment* that a wrong has been committed and that justice *entails* that a wrong not be brushed aside but put right, because unredressed wrongs are a mark not only of inequality but fundamentally of *disrespect*—in our instance, *racist* disrespect.⁷ At its best, what political forgiveness aims to enable is the construction of a moral, legal, and political space in which to arrive at how, with this acknowledgment, to work out an acceptable settlement between the inheritors of the historical injustice and the beneficiaries of it. I think this is what Beckles and his colleagues are after.

As will be evident from the pages of this issue (if not evident before), *Small Axe* takes history seriously. We are forever quarreling *with*, quarreling *about*, history. We have never been content with the idea that the past is a self-evident or neutral or passive domain that will supply us with ready-made answers to our questions in the present or our hopes for the future. Much—perhaps everything—depends on *what* we ask, and *how*. Much—perhaps everything—depends, in other words, on the *historiographical* questions that shape and drive, that *animate*, our preoccupations. *Small Axe* seeks to make us more reflexively aware of these questions and their assumptions so that we can better discern what they enable (perhaps politically) and what they do not.

—Cape Town, London, New York

December 2013

6 I have developed this theme in David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

7 Remember that this was the argument of Bernard Boxill in “The Morality of Reparation,” *Social Theory and Practice* 2, no. 1 (1972): 113–23.