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# Keywords in Caribbean Studies: A Project Statement

**Vanessa Pérez-Rosario and Ryan Cecil Jobson**

## Criticism

Responding to a call for a renewed and reinvigorated project of Caribbean criticism, the Keywords in Caribbean Studies project proposes an examination of the critical vocabulary that shapes our field of study. A genuinely regional Caribbean criticism—one that necessarily encompasses the entirety of the Caribbean Sea and its archipelago, its coastal territories of the South and Central Americas, and their global circuits of migration and diaspora—demands concerted attention to the critical vocabulary with which we engage the region. The project of Caribbean studies sits at a juncture in which dominant meanings are unsettled by professional academics and vernacular intellectuals. In our contemporary climate, touchstone concepts of sovereignty, development, decolonization, Indigeneity, and marronage, among others, resist taken-for-granted definitions that they are presumed to occupy in our field of study and popular parlance. This is the project of keywords that the condition of the region demands. Through the study of the keywords and organizing concepts of Caribbean studies, our project is a testing ground for the geopolitical frameworks and analytical trends that have defined the field. A focus on our critical vocabulary opens up a review of our scholarly paradigms, social imaginaries, and conceptual maps that frame the preoccupations of our field; through it we can revisit the place of diaspora and more broadly transnational movements in relating an island to a world, and crucially reconsider ideas about race and citizenship alongside assumptions about sex, sexuality, and gender. Recent forums in the pages of *Small Axe* point to the existential threat

of climate terror in the Caribbean as an occasion to think through the category of the region as a whole, albeit an undisciplined whole fashioned in a submarine unity across linguistic and political borders.

Keywords in Caribbean Studies grows out of the work of criticism that *Small Axe* has been engaged in for more than twenty-five years—since the publication of its inaugural issue in 1997. Our keywords project is an exercise in critical vocabulary that is less preoccupied with the production of a singular, authoritative definition for a term than it is with a genealogy of that term's history and usage. In an effort to synthesize the historical meanings and enduring significance of terms that define our region and guide our study, we seek to trace histories of concepts and speculate imaginatively about their future uses and directions. Attentive to parallel formations and tacit disagreements in Caribbean thought and letters, any keyword for the Caribbean is by definition multiple. Staging the productive tensions across disparate genealogies rather than enforcing a settled regional consensus, this new section of *Small Axe* embraces the polyvocal character of Caribbean criticism as a project that cuts across vectors of difference—to include language, size, and geography, as well as attendant histories of plantation slavery, indenture, and Indigenous dispossession. We are similarly interested in terms that signal the ways in which Caribbean people affirm their vitality. To this end, Keywords in Caribbean Studies extends the open inquiry to distill the multiple, overlapping, and rhizomatic formations of Caribbean discourse, a discourse that is best achieved by resisting a premature unity.

We might recall here, as an instructive case, the long-standing debates over the category of Kreyòl/Krijoro/Creole/créole/criollo—one that signals belonging to the region by birth or descent but one that also, at distinct moments and locations, is fashioned as an exclusive category that at different junctures is deployed to marginalize bozales, Amerindian, or Indian Caribbean peoples. Alongside the many critical genealogies of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the “miracle” of creolization and its discontents, we might ask what is at stake in the distance between the “Creole society” of Kamau Brathwaite, the “créolité” of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Rafaël Confiant, the “Creole criticism” of Sylvia Wynter, and the repertoires of “creolization” offered by Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Édouard Glissant.<sup>1</sup>

The project of Caribbean criticism lies ahead of us rather than behind us. The questions, debates, and existential threats confronted by the present generation cannot be dispassionately reduced to those of prior generations.<sup>2</sup> For *Small Axe*, the exercise in keywords offers a welcome venue to revisit existing concepts and categories with reference to their circulation

1 See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context,” in Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 189–210; Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Rafaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Sylvia Wynter, “Creole Criticism: A Critique,” *New World Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1972): 12–36; Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean in Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); and Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

2 On the temporality of generations, see David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

in recent scholarship, literature, media, political commentary, and everyday parlance. The challenges of the present—in which matters of climate, debt, and dispossession are palpably matters of “life and death”—make this practice of Caribbean criticism all the more urgent.<sup>3</sup>

## Multilingualism as Method

We are all well aware that the Caribbean is fragmented along linguistic and other lines derived from the colonial past and present, which resulted in the emergence of different and sometimes conflicting intellectual traditions and cultural-political identities. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the story of the Caribbean islands is one of changing colonial masters. The old colonial-inspired rivalry has effectively made us opaque to each other across languages in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> The geopolitical orientation of these islands has been away from—rather than toward—each other. Over the years *Small Axe* has launched initiatives to grapple with the balkanization of the region. Starting with *Small Axe 27* (October 2008), the journal devoted the October/November issue for a period of three years to the French-/Kreyòl-speaking Caribbean. In 2016, beginning with *Small Axe 51*, a special section has been devoted to the hispanophone Caribbean once a year.<sup>5</sup> As part of a larger initiative to integrate the Dutch, francophone, and hispanophone Caribbean into the journal’s preoccupations, our Keywords project will help us think through the distinct and shared critical vocabulary of the region.

Any Caribbean keywords project must wrestle with the origins and meaning of terms, their history and context of usage, and their translation into other Caribbean languages and contexts. Our project aims to explore the multilingual lives of Caribbean philosophical, literary, and political terms that shape the thinking of the region—the translatability or untranslatability of these concepts across languages; false cognates and semantic discrepancies; the traditions from which the concepts emerge; and the cultures they help define. We aim to examine these concepts in their cross-linguistic and cross-cultural complexity. In other words, our project aims to look at the critical vocabulary of the Caribbean with the problems of translation in mind—with an attunement to linguistic differences and the ways terms travel and are adopted in other languages of the region and beyond.<sup>6</sup> We recognize that everything is translatable, in some sense, and yet we want to hold on to those Caribbean words we prefer not to translate because too much will be lost, because what the term evokes will be missed, because the history and context of how its usage developed will be obscured.

The global hegemony of English is felt in the Caribbean. The anglocentricity of the region glosses over critical points of difference. Our project intends to hold on to a model of relation

3 See Ryan Cecil Jobson, “States of Crisis, Flags of Convenience: An Introduction,” *Small Axe*, no. 62 (July 2020): 68–77.

4 See David Scott, “Preface: Islands of *Créolité*,” *Small Axe*, no. 30 (November 2009): vii–x.

5 For special sections on the French-/Kreyòl-speaking Caribbean, see *Small Axe 27* (October 2008), 30 (November 2009), and 33 (November 2010); for special sections devoted to the hispanophone Caribbean, see *Small Axe 51* (November 2016), 56 (July 2018), 61 (March 2020), and 65 (July 2021). You can view issue contents at [smallaxe.net/sx/issues](http://smallaxe.net/sx/issues).

6 See Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, “On the Hispanophone Caribbean Question,” *Small Axe*, no. 51 (November 2016): 21–31.

that places renewed emphasis on the particularities of idioms—to make visible etymological histories and the trajectories of words in migration and to communicate their political, aesthetic, and translational histories. We aim to build a keywords project that will tease out these subtleties and that will focus on the divisions, tensions, transfers, and contradictions in the ways our critical vocabulary is used across the region and beyond. We imagine an open, plural, multilingual keywords project that, like the Small Axe Project itself, will lead us to rethink the regional and diasporic Caribbean in more complex and creative ways.

Our project is attuned to the history of concepts and the ways they are mobilized in the political present, heeding not only points of convergence but also points of disagreement and dissensus, where meanings remain in productive flux across disparate regional conversations and geographies. We aim to mobilize a multilingual framework in which keyword essays, when read together, will compare and meditate on the specific differences furnished to concepts by the languages of the region—Creoles, Dutch, English, French, Spanish—as a place to begin.

How do we build a robust framework that allows us to construct genealogies in relation? This task requires innovations in form and method to pose new questions to, and to examine new questions from, the Caribbean. For instance, What are the symmetries and asymmetries between the intellectual traditions of the anglophone, Dutch, francophone, and hispanophone Caribbean? To what extent are their respective imaginaries distinct from, organized by, and shaped by different philosophical inheritances and conceptual languages? How does the idiom of region (and the unfinished aspiration to regionalism) constitute both the horizon and the limits of Caribbean studies? Moreover, how have we, and how should we, understand the study of the linguistic regions of the Caribbean in relation to the wider archipelago, the littoral Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States?

These are only a few of the questions that emerge in relation to the question of Caribbean keywords. Obviously for us the Caribbean is not a self-evident space of life or reflection. Our vision is interdisciplinary and intertextual. Our hope is to contribute to a discussion of the Caribbean that will widen and deepen our frames of reference. We ask how we might remap the study of the region so as to complicate and invigorate new creative and critical discourses.<sup>7</sup>

### Our Invitation: *Zwart*, *Negro/a*, *Nègre*, *Black*

We begin with *Zwart*, *negro/a*, *nègre*, and *Black*. Few words in Caribbean discourse (popular or scholarly) have the multiplicity of meaning and fraught history of these. The authors here have written from where they stand in this linguistic tradition, to help us open a discussion of this crucial terminology in our racial lexicon. Our inaugural collection of essays, though organized in accordance with distinct linguistic traditions of the Caribbean, remains attentive to the sites

<sup>7</sup> The questions here were asked in *Small Axe* about the hispanophone Caribbean; our project expands them to consider the entire region. See Pérez-Rosario, "On the Hispanophone Caribbean Question."

of discursive tension and spillover in which ostensibly distinct lineages combine and clash to stunning effect. Vexed by legacies of colonialism and enslavement, these words have been both weaponized against and reclaimed by African-descended people in the Caribbean and its diaspora. For all Caribbean people, these are essentially and endlessly contested terms. The essays address some of the following questions: How might we historicize the uses of these terms in the varied linguistic traditions of Caribbean discourse? What is the social and ideological range of their reference within these linguistic traditions? What is the political range of their reference? Who counts and who gets to authorize who counts as Zwart, negro/a, nègre, and Black? What phenotypical features and bodily comportments shape our assumptions about these racial signifiers? What dimensions of experience are embedded in them? What is the historical being of Blackness?

These are orienting questions, no more. In an effort to think and rethink the lexicon of our cultural-political terms, *Small Axe* initiates an annual published conversation about them as an addition to our regular forums and research articles. In each July issue, the Keywords in Caribbean Studies project will present a discussion of a concept across the linguistic traditions that constitute Caribbean discourse. We are keen to see what opens up.