

# Beyond Mourning: The Legacy of the Grenadian Revolution in Literature<sup>1</sup>

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Thirty years ago, the people of Grenada overthrew the corrupt and brutal post-independence government of Eric Gairy in a revolutionary wave that was understood by many to be continuous with a long struggle against colonial rule. The New Jewel Movement (NJM), with the popular and charismatic Maurice Bishop at its head, was a multi-group united front influenced by the politics of National Liberation, Black Power, and African socialism. The People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) that came to power on March 13, 1979 did not represent a socialist revolution in the Marxist sense: the PRG took control of the existing state infrastructure and launched a reform program around housing, health, food, education, and land redistribution. But the new government had mass support and was both produced by and in turn fostered grassroots participation that challenged existing social hierarchies and oppression. The political significance of "the highest level of class struggle attained in the English-speaking Caribbean since the tumultuous slave uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" was felt throughout the region and world (Ambursley 191). Women were central to, and benefitted from, these processes: "it was the self-conscious activism of women themselves that began to transform gender relations. Supported by the revolutionary process, Grenadian women began 'moving into non-traditional occupations such as carpentry, plumbing, fisheries, and agricultural cooperatives'" (Marable 238-9).

Just four years later, a combination of internal contradictions and external pressures led to fatal factional divisions within the PRG, culminating in armed conflict and the murder of Maurice Bishop and many of his supporters on October 19, 1983, a day that came to be known as "Bloody Wednesday." This in turn provided the pretext for a military invasion by the U.S. government in what was officially called "Operation Urgent Fury." In light of the disparity in military might between the world superpower and the small island famous for its spice production, the informal name of the invasion was "the Sledgehammer and the Nutmeg."

These events have been imaginatively revisited in a wide range of regional and global literary works. Merle Collins's novel *Angel* powerfully evokes a moment of expanded horizons and human potential,

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when ordinary men and women believed that they could determine their own fates and fundamentally transform their conditions of existence. Many writers closely connected to the revolution reflect the same tone of raised expectations. Dionne Brand, who traveled to Grenada in February 1983, describes the mood in a 1991 interview:

I had just seen the end of the fighting in Zimbabwe. The Sandinistas were in power in Nicaragua, and Bishop was in Grenada. The wings of the American eagle hadn't clamped themselves over so much of the world as they have today . . . I felt that it was quite possible for a whole population to have a vision of equality, to see the possibility of living without being dominated by . . . patronizing and patriarchal governments. (qtd in Birbalsingh 126)

Audre Lorde, who visited Grenada, the home of her parents, in 1978 and 1983, expresses something similar in a 1985 essay: "Revolution. A nation decides for itself what it needs. How best to get it. Food. Dentists. Doctors. Roads." She saw "Grenadians who dared to believe that they could have the right to define themselves and the future of their nation independent of the United States" (179, 187). Glimmers of this can be seen in other literary works where Grenada is associated with renewal and transformation: In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson's figurative rebirth takes place in Grenada and Carriacou, and the central protagonists in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* go to revolutionary Grenada as part of their broader radicalization.

But broadly speaking, at least in Anglophone global literature, celebratory accounts are relatively uncommon, and the extant literature tends to focus more on the events of 1983—the divisions within the New Jewel Movement, Bloody Wednesday, and the U.S. military intervention. Mainstream political commentary and the news media in the U.S.—which had said little about the mass participation and achievements of the previous four years let alone the extensive longer history—obsessively reported on events of October 1983. But constrained by tight information control, the press tended to rely on official U.S. military and government reports, very few of which considered events from the Grenadian perspective. A 1991 study published in the *Journal of Communication* underscores this distortion:

The first action of U.S. troops against the Grenadian communication system effectively sealed Grenada from the outside world. Furthermore, the press was denied access to the island during the first four days of the invasion, apart from two short trips for a carefully selected group of foreign reporters organized by the United States Information Agency... During this press ban, all information from Grenada was provided by the U.S. Department of Defense, and many reports have since been proven incorrect. (Servaes 33)

The picture that came through was therefore incomplete. As Servaes adds, "For the most part, official U.S. viewpoints were pub-

lished, with almost no coverage of the protest movement within the United States. U.S. maneuvers in the field . . . received the bulk of attention, even during the press ban, when members of the press were not there to witness the events" (34).

The "official version" portrayed the intervention as a humanitarian mission to rescue Americans studying on the island and to defend the Grenadian public from Bishop's assassins and an alleged Cuban takeover. Merle Collins questioned this account, saying "U.S. forces arrived at the perfect moment for an easy psychological victory. Unless they are credited with an unfamiliar altruism, it must be agreed that theirs was cynical exploitation of a tragic situation" ("Grenada" 73). A substantial body of work has subsequently affirmed Collins's skepticism. Studies have found that a U.S. invasion was planned long before Bishop's assassination (Lewis 111); the students were not in any danger before the U.S. invaded, having been offered safe passage out of the country (Blum 271; McMahan 200); and U.S. government "evidence" of an imminent Cuban takeover was actually fabricated (Lewis 105). Furthermore, Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) law forbids military invasion of any member nation in the absence of a clear external threat (there was none) and the acquiescence of all members, which the U.S. did not have (Joyner 135-8). But at the time the official rationale at least temporarily garnered crucial support from a plurality of the Grenadian and American public, even while much of the rest of the world protested. In a *Newsweek* opinion poll, 69% of Americans responded that military intervention was justified to save Americans in danger, whereas only 48% thought it justified as a way to remove a Marxist regime.<sup>2</sup>

There were certainly dissident voices at the time. The Washington, D.C.-based *TransAfrica* refuted the mainstream coverage in the U.S:

The resort to military force reflects a failure on the part of our government to exercise any available diplomatic options to promote democracy in Grenada. We denied any receptive audience to Prime Minister Maurice Bishop or other representatives of the New Jewel Movement when they requested dialogue. The efforts of Bishop himself to create a representative government were given no credibility by the administration. The United States encouraged his demise by ignoring him. Meanwhile, American officials planned an invasion of Grenada as long as two years ago. This particular invasion was in the planning stages as early as two weeks before the military coup occurred. All of this suggests a covert U.S. role in the overthrow of the civilian government. (qtd. in Schoenhals 202)

In some venues, even members of the political elite were quite upfront about the geopolitical agenda. In one infamous speech, President Reagan explained that Grenada was important because "50 percent of everything we import comes through the Caribbean, the Panama canal" (qtd. in McMahan 23). Another Washington insider later said that, "Grenada grew as a positive symbol in administration lore. It was routinely invoked as a sign of a new toughness, reaf-

firming the Monroe Doctrine, big stick and gunboat diplomacy" (qtd. in Ronald Fernandez 412).

Writers who had looked to the New Jewel Movement for inspiration were traumatized by its demise, often sharing the feelings of "mourning and fear" Audre Lorde describes on her return to the island in December 1983: "All over Grenada I felt the deadening effect of horror and disbelief in every conversation about the war" (177, 188). Dionne Brand explains her own fall from hope to despair: "Here I was in Grenada with the possibility of assuaging the past in some way; and it had fallen apart. I thought, what the hell do we have to do to get redress? So in writing *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* I was incredibly angry and terribly despairing at some points. Mighty ideas are not the same as military might" (Birbalsingh 128). Brand's elegiac poem "Military Occupations" reiterates a profound sense of reversal: it opposes the arsenal of U.S. imperialism to the gains of social reform (such as "a hectare of land free from bosses" and "women's cooperatives") and repeatedly asserts that "you cannot fight" imperialism with these things, concluding "certainly you cannot fight it with dignity/and finally you can only fight it with the silence of your dead body" (*Chronicles* 40-3). The refrain is "dream is dead/lesser and greater/dream is dead in these antilles."

Other literary works thematically and figuratively echo Brand. "Lament for Maurice Bishop" by Howard Fergus metonymically connects Bishop with Grenada and in turn personifies the nation as a wounded body. The poem is built on images of danger and disaster: "lamentable fall;" "wasted rampart;" "sudden storm clouds . . . shipwrecking high desire." The final stanza is constructed in such a way as to compound the death of Bishop with that of Grenada: "Bishop of Grenada/ land of spice/ were you embalmed/ checked out so soon for paradise." In the poem "The Crime was in Grenada" Andrés Castro Ríos similarly confuses the body of Maurice Bishop with the island: ". . . Grenada, poor Grenada,/ lies in that same puddle of its own life's blood/ Returns to that dark night's execution,/ And the beautiful Caribbean, ay, my Caribbean, sees a part of its heart kneeling, put to death."<sup>6</sup>

June Jordan's emotionally powerful "Another Poem About the Man" (referring to Ronald Reagan) turns on disturbing images of the land and people assaulted by weaponry: "helicopters grating nutmeg trees/rifles shiny on the shellshocked sand/. . . artillery and tanks up against a halfnaked girl/and her boyfriend." The flesh of violated fruit becomes indistinguishable from that of humans, and Grenada itself is personified as an assaulted woman: "to smash and despoil the papaya/ the breadfruit and bloodroot/ shattered and bloodspattered/ from freedom/ rammed down the throat/ of Grenada now Grenada she/ no sing no more."

The counter-narratives created by these writers recast the invasion as the murder of the aspiration for liberation and self-determination. Audre Lorde explicitly argues that Bishop's death was a cynical pretext for an invasion long planned as a demonstration "of what will happen to any country that dares to assume responsibility for its own destiny" (184). Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* echoes this perspective. After elaborating the many reasons why Antiguaners need

their own revolutionary change, she speculates what would happen if they were to “imagine another event, the event of Maurice Bishop in Grenada, and they imagine that such a man will materialise in Antigua and he’ll do Maurice Bishop-like things and say Maurice Bishop-like things and come to a Maurice Bishop-like end—death, only this time at the hands of the Americans” (73-4).

In her 1991 book *Storm Signals*, Kathy McAfee elaborates the full analysis behind such comments:

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Washington officials became alarmed about trends in the Caribbean. Their concern was not so much the region’s economic crisis but rather the movements which had arisen in response to that crisis . . . the March 1979 revolution in Grenada provoked a more extreme U.S. response [than the economic destabilization of Manley in Jamaica]. The revolution . . . was part of a larger movement in the Eastern Caribbean of new parties and popular organizations, encouraged by the Jamaican quest for political and economic independence and inspired by the Black Power and pan-African movements. (34)

As McAfee notes, both establishment and dissident voices cite the U.S. government’s compulsion to overcome the “Vietnam syndrome” as a primary motive behind the invasion. Across the globe national liberation struggles had dismantled formal European colonialism and discredited imperialism. The same spirit suffused the tripartite movement that ended the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese liberation movement, the antiwar movement in the U.S., and the soldiers’ revolt in the U.S. military. And in turn, global women’s, gay-lesbian liberation, and black power movements further transformed social relationships through the 1970s. June Jordan’s 1985 poetry collection *Living Room* marks the transition between the two eras, paying tribute to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua, Soweto, Palestine, Guatemala, and Lebanon, while speaking out against the inequities of race, gender, sexuality, and class within the U.S. At the same time, the poems are acutely aware of conservative backlash and the imposition of a new reality under Reaganism.

The elegiac literature surrounding the invasion of Grenada thus apprehends a global historical break: the death of an era of struggles for liberation, and the onset of a new phase of imperialism—neoliberalism—sometimes referred to as the Washington Consensus or simply capitalist globalization. As the 1990 study *In the Shadows of the Sun* illustrates, in the 1970s the Caribbean broadly speaking was marked by a politics of non-alignment, independent foreign policy, state welfare provision, and economic nationalization; the 1980s, in contrast, was to be a decade of political conservatism emphasizing privatization, foreign investment, and structural adjustment through the World Bank and the IMF. The invasion of Grenada

reverberated across the region and set the stage for an all-out attack on progressive forces by conservative parties and governments. The U.S. invasion of Grenada also led to the consolidation of conservative and pro-U.S. governments throughout the region. The net effect of all

of these factors was a political reversal of the radical trend across the region, a reversal which brought in its train a new set of policy orientations, namely, the policies of structural adjustment. (Antrobus 92)

The impact on women was particularly harsh.

As Gloria Emeagwali has argued, women disproportionately “pay the price” of structural adjustment the world over due to their overrepresentation in low-wage and insecure areas of employment and their overwhelming responsibility for unpaid domestic labor and childcare. In her 1997 study, Mary Johnson Osirim describes the impact of neoliberalism on the region’s working class women: “At the close of the twentieth century . . . the majority of women in the English-speaking Caribbean persist in unrewarding, gender-segregated activities that severely restrict their upward mobility” (55).

Jordan’s poem “From Sea to Shining Sea” crystallizes the transition in the U.S. context. Jordan catalogues the domestic measures that negatively impact those who are already marginalized and the aggressive foreign policies that, in the words of the poem, are part of a ruling class campaign “to restore the natural order:” “the national/ leadership boasts that this country will no longer/ be bullied and blackmailed by wars for liberation/ or wars/ for independence elsewhere on the planet” (16). Between each verse, the line “this was not a good time” is repeated, with variations: “to be a woman,” “to be without a job,” “to have a job,” “to be gay,” “to be black,” “to be a child,” “to be old,” and so on. But the final stanza is animated with the confident spirit of resistance: “this is a good time/ this is the best time/ this is the only time to come together/ fractious/ kicking/ spilling/ burly/ whirling/ raucous/ messy/ Free/ exploding like the seeds of a natural disorder.” While these poems are still linked to the earlier period of liberation struggles, conservative reaction is an oppressive looming weight.

In Grenada, the years after 1983 saw the rise of the New National Party and the dismantling of many of the social programs installed by the revolutionary government. By the end of the decade, Grenada had unprecedented foreign debt and trade deficit, growing budgetary crises, high unemployment, and record levels of drug addiction, alcoholism, and myriad social problems<sup>4</sup>. During the 1990s and in to the 21st century, Grenada experienced sporadic periods of economic growth, but the benefits were not generalized throughout the population. Furthermore, the neoliberal orientation on foreign investment and the service sector left the nation vulnerable to shifts in the world economy, while the centrality of tourism magnified the destructive impact of Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

Arundhati Roy, one of the most outspoken postcolonial writer-activists to illuminate the connection between military interventions and capitalist globalization, cites the invasion of Grenada as an important link in a chain of events leading to the disastrous occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq two decades later:

Certainly it does not tire—this, the Most Free nation in the world. What freedoms does it uphold? . . . Outside its

borders, the freedom to dominate, humiliate and subjugate—usually in the service of America's real religion, the "free market." So when the U.S. government christens a war "Operation Infinite Justice," or "Operation Enduring Freedom," we in the Third World feel more than a tremor of fear. Because we know that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others. (Roy "Brutality")

The invasion of Grenada is indelibly associated with the ascendance of this voracious phase of economic and military imperialism.

Since Roy wrote those words, the system she describes has been discredited as a result of both its own internal contradictions and external opposition. With global capitalism mired in the biggest crisis in generations, the free market mantra of neoliberalism has given way to new calls for state interventionism and reform. The past decade has also seen the "neoliberal rebellion" across Latin America, from the Andean struggles against resource privatization to the Venezuela-led Bolivarian revolution. Tariq Ali captures this shift in his 2006 book, *Pirates of the Caribbean*:

The fact is that South America is on the march again, offering hope to a world either deep in neoliberal torpor or suffering daily from the military and economic depredations of the New Order. The continent is full of echoes from past struggles and a new wave of leaders and activists are aware of their importance. History cannot be repeated, but nor should it be ignored. It has to be assimilated and understood. (138-9)

Women have been central to these processes, and as Sujatha Fernandes explains in her study of women organizing in the barrios, even while many are new to political activism, "experiences of shared struggle from previous decades" crucially inform their work (98).

In the context of these new waves of resistance, it is surely the right time to return to the spirit of anti-imperialism and independence that animated Grenada in 1979. There is much to be learned from the mistakes of the New Jewel Movement. Many have cited the leadership's lack of democracy and increasing removal from the mass movement. Others have pointed to the inherent contradictions of a small island pursuing a politics of "breaking away" while maintaining a dependent location within the global economy (Marable 227, 249; Meeks 163-4). These lessons point to the need for grassroots accountability and regional—and ultimately global—solidarities. But there is much to be learned also from the concrete achievements and larger aims of the movement itself.

In her introduction to the collection *Women Writing Resistance*, Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez describes the contributing writers' "rage at social injustice, at political oppression, at the collusion of the U.S. and Europe in sustaining the deep inequities that mar living conditions for the majority throughout Latin America and the

Caribbean." She then cites what Aurora Levins Morales calls "the work of infusing people's imaginations with possibility, with the belief in a bigger future . . . the cultural activism . . . [that is] the essential fuel of revolutionary fire" (7). As new generations dare to believe that another world is both necessary and possible, we can anticipate the imaginative literature accompanying the birth of a post-neoliberal age of resistance, suffused once more with the spirit of hope and possibility captured in Merle Collins's exuberant poem, "Callaloo": "de change/an' de promise/of de change/is sweet an' strong."<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from a presentation as part of a panel on the legacy of the Grenada Revolution at the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars conference held in Grenada in April 2008. The other panelists were Merle Collins, Shalini Puri, and Dessima Williams.

<sup>2</sup>Published in *Newsweek* Nov. 7, 1983. 65.

<sup>3</sup>His 1986 poem "The Crime Was in Grenada" is translated into English and included in the anthology *Puerto Rican Poetry* by Roberto Marquez.

<sup>4</sup>For descriptions of the aftermath of the invasion, see Marable 264; O'Shaughnessy 219; Ferguson 301-2.

<sup>5</sup>First published in *Because the Dawn Breaks*, the complete poem is also reprinted in *Callaloo* 30.1 (2007): 238-241.

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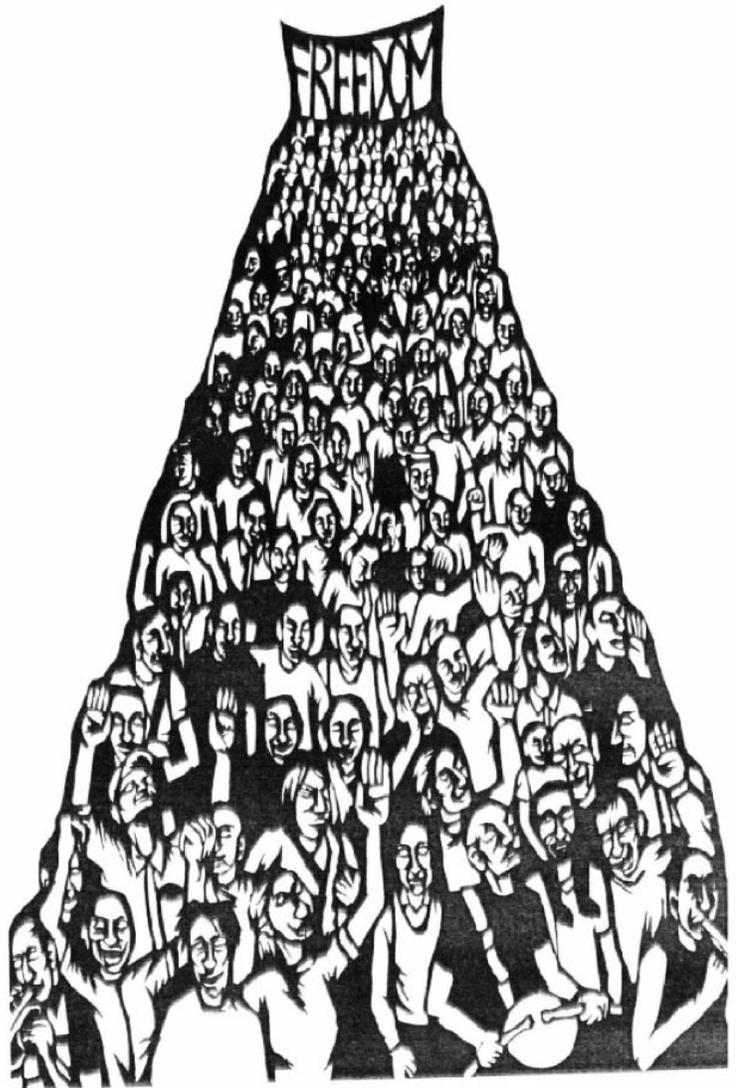


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