

Art, Memories & The Grenada Revolution

By Kimalee Phillip



Figure 1. Forgetting Is Not An Option project outreach materials¹

It was October 19, 1983. I was not yet a part of my mother's imagination. Far removed from the violent and traumatic realities of that day and the days to come, I remained a part of an (un)known metaphysical plane that was still birthing the figments of what would be my whole self. Two years later, on February 14, the joys, laughs, moments of resistance, struggle and tenacity that were created and unearthed on that October day would now sit and manifest themselves in my bones, flesh and spirit. I was not yet born during the Grenada Revolution, yet it continues to live on — though perhaps not in the same way that it started.

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My name is Kimalee Phillip and I am an African woman who was born and raised on the island of Grenada. Like many others in my generation, I grew up within an educational system that did not always prioritize or value the lives and voices of my ancestors, and this was particularly true for those who were seen as going against the grain. The stories of those considered less radical — and by implication more logical, practical and therefore invested in the lives of the community — superseded and at many times replaced the stories of those perceived as “radical”. This flawed binary inaccurately associates particular characteristic traits to perceived types of leadership and fails to capture the importance of the multiplicity of approaches and strategies. It also helps to ensure a revisionist and sanitized history, and as the Ewe-Mina proverb so accurately states: “until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story.”

As a Co-Director of the youth-led social action collective called Groundation Grenada, I helped to create a cultural memory project called *Forgetting Is Not An Option*. *Forgetting Is Not An Option* is a multimedia, archival project meant to capture, unearth, create and revive memories of the Grenada Revolution and its impact on the continued shaping of the interpersonal, political and socio-cultural relationships with and among Grenadians. Through art, we aim to facilitate the remembering, unearthing and (re)shaping of the political and cultural experiences that have and can be influenced by revolution(s).

On October 19, 1983, then-Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, Minister of Education, Youth, Social and Women’s Affairs Jacqueline Creft, Minister of Foreign Affairs Unison Whiteman, Minister of Housing and Construction Norris Bain, and trade unionists Fitzroy Bain and Vincent Noel (Collins, 1995) were killed on Fort George (previously named Fort Rupert after the slain father of Maurice Bishop). They stood against the stone walls of the fort as Grenadian accomplices rained bullets into their bodies — a move that some suggest was sanctioned by the U.S. government and made more easily possible because of tensions and splits that were occurring within the New Jewel Movement (NJM) as a result of changes in political and

strategic approaches (*Democracy Now*, 2004; Clark, 1983). According to Don Rojas, who acted as the press secretary for Maurice Bishop, the U.S. Invasion had been planned as early as 1981 (two years after the NJM under Bishop, overthrew the ruling party in 1979), when the coup provided the perfect opportunity to implement it: "In fact, there were mock invasion, military exercises on the island of Viequas off of the island of Puerto Rico. Viequas happens to be similar in topography to Grenada. This had been in the works, so to speak, for at least two years before October of 1983" (*Democracy Now*, 2004).

Some have chosen to bury the memories of Revolution.

We have chosen to unearth them.

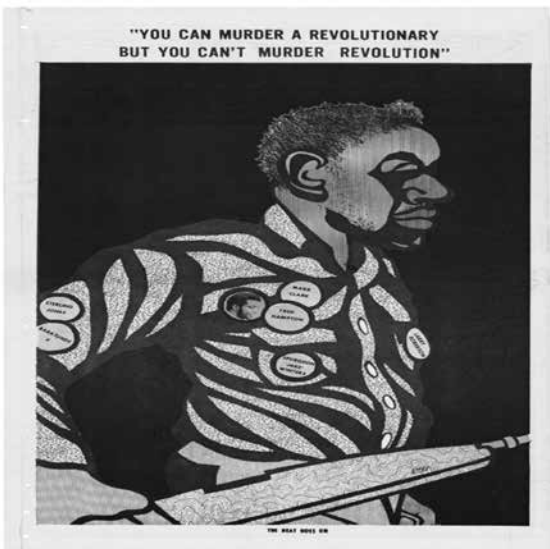


Figure 2. Douglas (2011)

Symbols of Revolution

With many revolutionary and civil rights struggles, the movement usually is reduced so that it is embodied by one person who then

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becomes the symbol of hope, change and resistance. Minimizing an entire movement to the actions and personality of an individual removes the agency and role that many others have played and creates an almost super-human character that is impossible to maintain. And if this person is killed and the ability of the public to say goodbye (through a formal burial for example) is removed and, further, if the body is desecrated, the possibility and memory of the movement and successful resistance becomes more easily repressed in the eyes of opposing forces.

In the case of the 1960s Black struggle movement in the United States, those human symbols primarily were Martin Luther King Jr. for the civil rights movement and for the more radical aspects of the Black freedom struggle it was Malcolm X; in the case of the Underground Railroad it was Harriet Tubman; with the Tanzanian liberation movement it was Julius Nyerere and with the Grenada Revolution, it was Maurice Bishop. The Grenadian writer Merle Collins speaks of the sometimes impossibly blurred distinction between Bishop — the person — and the New Jewel Movement, of which he was the leader (Scott, 2010).

The reduction of a movement to a single person increases and even hastens the vulnerability of a liberatory struggle to implosion, and places an unreasonable amount of hope in a mortal being. Even in death, opposing forces understand that the individual leaders could still inspire the possibility of resistance and so every measure is taken to diminish that possibility through destroying their remains, as was the case with Patrice Lumumba whose body was chopped into pieces and had acid thrown on it by Belgian forces. The American imperialist government had called for Maurice Bishop's removal from leadership because he embodied a threat to the Western capitalist empire and strongly advocated for the people of Grenada, a predominantly African nation, to begin seeing themselves as full and equal human beings: his remains are still unaccounted for. These revolutionary figures represented more than a change in philosophies and ideals; they also advocated for social and material shifts that challenged the "profit and exploitation by any means necessary" status quo.

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon, 2004, p. 210)

In the case of Grenada's executed political leaders, what happened to those bodies is still unknown (though some have claimed that the bodies were burnt and disposed of). As a result, the families of those murdered have had their processes of mourning interrupted and, in some cases, placed on permanent hold. Unfortunately, Maurice Bishop's mother died in August 2013, without ever knowing what happened to her son's body and the chance of saying farewell with a proper burial.

One of the main functions and tactics of coloniality is to sever the oppressed from their memories, histories and sites of particular significance; these include burial sites, statues and other pillars of revolutionary possibility (Vazquez, 2009). Burials in Grenadian culture remain a significant aspect of the living bidding farewell to their loved ones, while also being a time for communities and estranged blood and chosen family members to reconvene and celebrate. As with the case of the Madres of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who for years have been searching for the bodies of their children, physical bodies and burial sites represent the renewed embodiment and continued presence of revolutionary ideas. The need for some of the mothers to excavate the bodies and remains of their children reflects the "profound Catholic formation of our people....almost a need to have a dead body, a burial, and a Mass" (Robben, 2000 citing Madres, 1987 37: 10) which in many ways also reflects the need and significance for finding the bodies of Bishop, Creft and the other revolutionaries who were killed during and after the Grenada Revolution, as Grenada is a predominantly Christian nation.

Why a Cultural Memory Project?

The collective gathering, sharing and creating of memories vis-à-vis print, audio, theatrical, performative and oral work, facilitates a reunification and healing process among a wide cross-section of

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people from various communities. There is a historical, cultural and political resonance in the songs that we sing, the poetry that we recite, in the soca and calypso songs that we share and in our public art and symbols. During the revolutionary years, songs of liberation could be heard across the radio waves: similarly, political propaganda reminding people of the goals of the Revolution could be found in newspapers and pamphlets across the island.



Figure 3. Photo of The New Jewel Newspaper dated Friday August 13, 1982



Figure 4. n.a. n.d. Graffiti on a building in Grenada



Figure 5. n.a, n.d. Famous Billboard nailed on someone's home or business in Grenada

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Billboard art became prominent during the Revolution as a means for education and mobilization. Revolutionary slogans and primers, literacy work and healthcare education, calls to join the militia and protect against Yankee invasion: all these required illustration. It was during this period also that the African-American solidarity worker Michele Gibbs was commissioned to create a portrait of Fédon, a portrait that was less a likeness than an ideological resignification. It was a heavily Africanized image of the mulatto leader of the 1775 rebellion, one which became the official portrait of Fédon during the Revolution.....the 1982 public display of military strength designed to build mass confidence in Grenada's ability to resist attack was called the "Fédon maneuver. (Puri, 2014, p.62)

However, art was not always used to share supportive messages of the Revolution: it was also used by those who did not agree with the philosophies and mission of the Revolution or who feared a shift to communist and socialist political ideologies.



Figure 6. Graffiti on dilapidated building near the Coca Cola Bottling Plant in Tempe, St. George's

By way of explanation: the graffiti in the previous picture says, "When aligned to a doctrine, prepare for the backlash" which is similar to a statement made by former Prime Minister Tillman Thomas when he said, on May 23, 2012, that Grenadians are bearing the scars for "flirting with a certain ideology" (*Prime Minister Calls*, 2012). The other messages in the picture state: "Thank God for U.S. and Caribbean Heroes of Freedom" and "Thank You U.S.A. for Liberating Us".

The Influence of the Black Arts Movement

The Grenada Revolution was also influenced by the Black Arts Movement in the United States. At a time when poets and other artists such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Langston Hughes explicitly linked political activism with their craft, Grenadian and Caribbean artists were synthesizing radical political imagining into their work through the arts. Music was a central theme throughout the Revolution, usually used to open gatherings, conventions and meetings. Identified as a Grenadian treasure, Locksley Lobo Logie's "Nattydread in a PRA", which was released during and popularized throughout the Grenada Revolution, helped trace political Revolutionary thought. Another popular song that some have identified as the theme of the Revolution was *Forward March Against Imperialism*:

*Rupert marched to Otways House
Forward March
Alister marched against oppression
Forward March*

*And now Grenadians have caught their vision
End misery and oppression
So we fill Grenada full with our song
Forward march, Forward March,
Forward march against Imperialism
Forward march, Forward March
Forward march against Imperialism*

*We have fought colonialism, Forward March
We will fight it to the end, Forward March*

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*Marryshow fought for Federation, Forward March
We all fought for liberation, Forward March*

*Now we women fight for justice, Forward March
Fighting against Imperialism, Forward March*

*As we women won our Freedom, Forward March
We will go forward united, Forward March*

Songs such as those produced by Locksley Lobo Logie and The Magnificent Six called on Grenadians to remain diligent and true to the mandate of the Revolution. They were also meant to remind the people that the struggles of Grenadians were connected to other anti-imperial struggles globally. Songs were also used to capture the pain, loss and anger that were part and parcel of the Revolution such as Flying Turkey's "Innocent Blood" which responded to the killing of three schoolgirls by a bomb, intended to be an attack on the Revolution, that was detonated at a June 1980 rally in Queen's Park. (Puri, 2014)

Through other forms of collective performances, such as drumming and story-telling, Grenadians continue to engage in the forever forbidden political-speak. Though no one wants to 'talk politics,' everyone will do it in song as it allows for the injection of humour and reduces the possibility of physical threat. Drumming contingents such as TUMDA who drum and sing about historical and contemporary social and political issues evoke within us feelings, emotions and reactions that demand of us a deeper exploration, even if just within that moment of performance. As TUMDA chants to the melodious movement of drumming, they urge the crowd to sing along with them and though you may not initially, or ever, agree to what is being said, you sing along to it and your body and spirit moves with it; eventually creating a synchronized group performance. Through *parang*, artists poke fun at politicians, business leaders and community individuals — Grenadians have always been an oratorical people. During the Revolutionary period, Grenadians successfully used theatre to engender a collective, political ontology that witnessed the performance and collaboration

of regional theatre companies such as Sistren, the National Liberation Theatre and the creation of the Theatre Group of the National Youth Organization (TGNYO), We Foute, and Veenyway La Grenade, just to name a few (Puri, 2014). Art, song, performance and public symbols help to normalize political messages which, on their own, are often seen as risky, uncertain and all-or-nothing approaches to change.

Art and Memory

Remembering, or memory, “touch[es] very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority. Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths, the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory, both in school and university, is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider’s understanding of one’s country, tradition, and faith” (Said, 2000, p. 176). The curriculums administered at the high school and community college levels reflect the ways in which language, stories and understandings of the Revolution and the subsequent invasion are made to reflect a particular narrative and paradigm which serves the interests of imperialist agendas. The shaping of memories is very much a part of how we see ourselves and how we understand our histories.

In attempting to analyse what is remembered, how it is remembered and what this means for collective social memories particularly in post-revolutionary Grenada, I immediately thought of the presence of monuments and publicly displayed visuals. Probably one of the only (and certainly one of the most significant) statues representative of the Grenada Revolution is the bust of Bishop that is erected on Cemetery Hill, one of the biggest cemeteries in the main capital. This bust is now hardly visible as it is covered in shrubs and bushes.

As I read David Scott’s interview with Grenadian author Merle Collins I was reminded of the two intersecting arches near the recently renamed Maurice Bishop International Airport. Is the purpose of these drab-looking arches to “demand for a submissive forgetting of the 13 March 1979 Revolution and the political-historical traditions from which it came and for which it stood” (2010, p. 80)? Consider

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the text placed on the plaques of the two arches, text meant to insert a particular narrative into the Grenadian fabric that undermines the work of the People's Revolutionary Government by positioning the U.S as the saviour and liberator of the Grenadian people from a dictatorial and communist power.



Figure 7. Picture of the arches near the Maurice Bishop Airport, St. George's, Grenada.

The plaque of the main arch reads; "This plaque expresses the gratitude of the Grenadian people to the forces from the United States of America and the Caribbean, especially those who sacrificed their lives in liberating Grenada on 25 October 1983. It was dedicated by President Ronald Reagan on his visit to Grenada on 20 February 1986." The second, smaller arch, is again dedicated to "Operation Urgent Fury, October 25-November 21, 1983." The plaque, from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was placed there on 16 May 1995, and reads; "To honor those members of the United States military who through commitment and sacrifice, returned freedom to Grenada." David Scott, the person who interviewed Collins, argues that "here, then, is the elementary point of the monument: on the one side, the mocking cynicism of imperial power; on the other, the limp prostration of the absolute defeat of spirit. It is empire's sneering reward for a people's audacity" (2010, p. 80-81).

Public monuments are meant to capture, remove, define and shape how and what is remembered and associated with a particular person or moment in time. Scott describes the two arches that lay claim to the memories of the Grenada Revolution in this manner:

Such public monuments, of course — physical inscriptions of remembrance — aim to give a certain weight and solidity, a certain concrete texture to the past they conserve in the present. Transforming the realm of nature into a locale of memory, the monument is a space imbued with moral and political significance, a social fact that bears the burden of referentiality. But the monument is more than a mere “exteriorization” of memory, because monuments are never innocent of power. If they are about signification, naming the past, they are also themselves the signatures of power, telling us what to remember and how. Monuments serve not only an informative but also a declarative public function. They serve to authorize a certain way of remembering the past, and therefore to deliberately displace or preclude other ways of remembering- and in doing so they help to propagate the illusion of a common memory. (2010, p. 80)

Conclusion

The Grenada Revolution showed that there were alternatives to the sociopolitical and economic structures being imposed on Grenada by the imperialist and capitalist West. It illustrated that another world, another way of being, could and can be imagined, created and made possible. Coupled with the imaginative scope of art, song, and dance, political movements were made real — and they were made fun. People chanted political mantras as they drank a glass of rum. Young children denounced imperialism as they played hopscotch in the yards. Women led political meetings as they laughed about personal dramas. The re-prioritizing of the interests and realities of the working class challenged the influence that imperialism had on the minds and lives of the people and how the country was being governed. It also challenged the Grenada bourgeoisie class, and rejected the exploitation and the stripping of lands, resources and people in the name of profit. Grenadians saw and felt an urgency and a need to change the status quo; as Joseph Ewart Layne stated when asked if

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given a chance would he change his course of action on March 13, 1979, “..the battle lines were already drawn; it was then do or die! I could see no alternative to moving. I still can’t” (Layne, 2014, p. 179).

In one of the poorer countries of the Caribbean an anti-imperialist social democracy was not only being sought, but was coming to fruition. Women’s rights, education, agriculture, labour rights, land rights and youth empowerment were at the forefront of the Revolution and the government was open to collaborating with similarly-principled countries (such as Cuba) that were willing to financially back the projects of the Revolution. And the People’s Revolutionary Government’s growing nationalization projects were not well received by the business elite.

Immediately following the murders of several revolutionary leaders and the implosion of the Revolution, 6,000 to 10,000 U.S. soldiers invaded Grenada, an island with a population at that time of approximately 100,000. This was a traumatic and abrupt intervention, not only onto Grenadian soil but also into the memories, minds and spirits and onto the bodies of Grenadians. There was no opportunity to mourn the killing of the leaders on Fort George or the many others who were killed as a part of the coup. There was also no time to heal and mend from wrongs that occurred in the lead-up to and aftermath of the People’s Revolutionary Government ousting from government. Grenadian poet Hudson George wrote *The Invaders Landed* as a reflection of his experience of the invasion:

*Upon the shores they
They landed
Yes they did
Like pirates
Who came before
They came to conquer
What they had conquered
Long before*

*Upon the shores
They landed*

Yes, they did

*They did not use cannons
They did not use sail ships
Swords and muskets
They came with missiles
And destroyers
With different types of bombers
And surveillance air crafts*

*Mommy said she was not frightened
Daddy said the same thing too
They said that the Caribs and Arawaks
Are dead and gone
And slavery don't exist any more*

*Upon the shores
They landed
Yes they did
Like pirates who came before
And conquered without fear of the population*

Through theatre, music, visual art, poetry and public symbols, Grenadians continue to preserve and express the dynamisms of their fluid political, cultural and social perspectives. In particular we, as young Grenadians, are witnessing the proliferation of photography and film, of art and theatre, and of a renewed political desire for change. Younger Grenadians are intervening in public discourse by grasping the camera, grasping the microphones and grasping the pens to capture their complicated and shifting political, social and cultural realities. The diversity of these opinions and reflections is what we hope to capture and document through Groundation Grenada's *Forgetting Is Not An Option* project.

Some have chosen to bury the memories of Revolution. We have chosen to not only unearth them but to also build new memories, new possibilities for the generations to come.

ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to the kind support of *ARC Magazine* who created this image and others for Groundation Grenada's launch of Phase N°1 of the *Forgetting Is Not An Option* project.

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