**Culture, Revolution, and Nation: Popular Cultural Engagement During the Grenadian Revolution**

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The Grenadian Revolution sought to create a new shared socialist culture built on the principles of solidarity and liberation, and doing this meant overcoming the dominance of the outside English speaking world and overcoming the alienation of the masses. The New Jewel Movement (NJM) had emphasised the importance of socialist culture since its foundation, and after the People’s Revolutionary Government (PRG) assumed power in 1979, a new focus on this culture in Grenada followed. The PRG elevated local folk culture, promoted an anti-imperialist independent ethos, and funded many cultural projects in order to build and strengthen a shared revolutionary project. Culture became a key foundation of revolutionary struggle and consciousness building, and the culture of the Grenadian Revolution became something shaped by both the government and the participation of the masses. This essay will particularly focus on language, poetry, and calypso, given Grenadan culture’s emphasis on the oral tradition, but will also explore how novels, visual art, theatre, journalism, radio, and education became embedded in the revolutionary struggle. Moreover, I will endeavour to explore the participation of the masses in this new cultural environment, how the cultural output of Grenada changed over the course of the 1979-83 revolutionary period, and the after-effects and legacy of this cultural project.

Under Eric Gairy, the Creole language had become more acceptable in public life but retained the stigma of being improper.[[1]](#footnote-1) The PRG would encourage a new reappraisal of the Creole language, including it in education and permitting its use public life, even though official language remained dominated by standard English. Gerhard Dilger argues that the PRG’s introduction of the Creole language into the classroom was a truly radical move which brought social acceptance to the common people’s culture, meaning that their culture became entwined with the Revolution itself.[[2]](#footnote-2) This elevation of the Creole language and its psychological impact cannot be overstated, and Rosa Maria Torres further adds that the new officialization of Grenadian English meant that the people were able to reclaim their own cultural expressions, and to “value their language, the living manifestation of cultural identity”.[[3]](#footnote-3) However the language used by the government was often inconsistent, and Gail R. Pool argues that its use of terms like “socialist” and “communist” as terms of good vs. evil reflected an incoherent ideology.[[4]](#footnote-4) Standard English was taught in order to give Grenadians access to the cultural output of the outside world, but within their own country, their native voices finally found their place in books, documents, pamphlets, school work, newspapers, and magazines – things previously inaccessible to those who struggled with standard English. The role of Fedon, the Revolution’s publishing house, in disseminating the literature of the revolution and promoting Grenadian writers, alongside promoting Grenadian English and its literary output is also important here. Named after the leader of Grenada’s 1795 uprising against British rule and slavery, it featured a man with a rifle as its logo, a reflection of its militant publications which strived to spread PRG information, and promoted a literate and culturally engaged society.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is notable that education and culture portfolios were merged within the government. The Ministry for Education and Culture was the largest of all the ministries and was probably run the most efficiently and democratically. Within the ministry, the March 13 Education Committee ran their own writing competitions, and whilst submissions may well have been screened for ideological purity, they were a unique opportunity for the apparatus of the state to incorporate the masses into its cultural production, and it did allow many ordinary Grenadians with otherwise unnoticed writing talents to achieve recognition. The promotion of culture, particularly literary culture became a huge part of the transformation of the education system – one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the Revolution. Politicians themselves were involved in this promotion, and Didacus Jules, the Secretary of Education wrote in a poem “Freedom is as basic as the a.b.c/An uneducated people can never be free”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Here poetry took on an informative and triumphant reflection upon the new education system, providing easily accessible revolutionary literature to a country where people were learning to read, with nearly half the population being functionally illiterate at the time the NJM came to power.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Centre for Popular Education (CPE) targeted the adult population successfully, having existed as an unofficial organisation since the foundation of the NJM in 1973, and after the “Year of Liberation” of 1979, 1980 was named the “Year of Education and Production”, with an array of scholarships, writing programs, and popular cultural initiatives accompanying it. Eventually the literacy campaign would be so successful that CPE volunteers went to join Nicaragua’s literacy campaign in 1981.[[8]](#footnote-8) The texts studied in the literacy programs prioritised the Revolution, which was the issue teaching was supposed to be built around, and pamphlets like “Let Us Learn Together” deliberately used simple texts that directly tackled revolutionary and local themes, provided in standard English to aid the process of learning to read and write.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Laurence A. Breiner explains how the Grenadian revolution elevated the prominence of poets in society in an unprecedented way, with the revolutionary government and its associates themselves putting out poetry anthologies, the first being *Freedom Has No Price* (1981) which was published for the anniversary of the Revolution.[[10]](#footnote-10) The poems in this anthology promoted the work and interests of the common Grenadian – the “poetry of those who daily labour”, as the foreword articulates.[[11]](#footnote-11) Featuring the work of more than 50 authors, including both established poets and ordinary people, the poems featured energised ideological defence of the revolution, and emphasised an affective and personal experience of the revolution. Poems like “Beat Back Destabilization” and “Stand Firm Student” certainly upheld the government line, and these revolutionary poets largely saw themselves as “people’s messengers”, and the founders of a new educational literary tradition.[[12]](#footnote-12) But there is deep sincerity in how the poems deal with underdevelopment and suffering under Gairy in the first half of the anthology, and liberation and hope under the PRG in the second – allowing the Grenadian worker, themselves given the opportunity to be a published poet, to narrate their own destiny.

The *Free West Indian* (FWI) newspaper was set up to act as a voice of the people and the revolution, billing itself as “the national newspaper of free Grenada”. The FWI was certainly a propagandistic tool, but it was also an outlet which allowed for personal and collective cultural expression, and it endorsed Grenadian culture unapologetically. It promoted features on well-known and ordinary Grenadians, particularly artists, and was very informative about cultural performances and exhibitions around the islands. It deliberately focused on local experiences to educate and entertain, for example using remittances from relatives in its educational maths problems, and explaining in depth many of the employment and agricultural changes happening around the islands that affected its readers. Furthermore, the March 13 Education Committee used the FWI for its writing competitions, and its mass readership reflected a country that was effectively mobilised by the PRG and its institutions.

Whilst the FWI sought to represent the interests of the common Grenadian, its strict control by the government did lead to issues around the question of censorship. Culture became more tightly regulated by the government, and whilst the PRG did initially allow foreign publications to be imported from the US and from other Caribbean countries, in 1981 it prohibited them and introduced far stricter laws around media control, with Maurice Bishop himself saying “the contents of the information circulated by the western mass media in developing countries is one-sided – they distort realities and they neglect our national interest”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Given that the fall of Norman Manley’s government in 1980 had been abetted by a hostile Jamaican press – a major blow to left-wing politics in the English-speaking Caribbean – this approach was not without merit.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this new environment however, an increased emphasis on the culture of Grenada and its native traditions was allowed to flourish in a way that resisted American and British influence in the Caribbean.

However, anti-revolutionary art was not tolerated in any way by the PRG, and whilst there was a huge explosion of artistic expression during the revolutionary period, writers deemed opponents of the Revolution had their work heavily censored. Moreover, apolitical art was frequently stigmatised as petit bourgeois by the PRG and its supporters, and often whole genres were stigmatised as such – for instance, reggae music was considered bourgeois compared to the publicly acceptable calypso genre. In the time he was detained by the PRG, Winston Whyte produced an anthology of poetry called *Burnt Embers: Or Poems of a Prisoner*, which was not published until 2003. At Richmond Hill Prison, many independent journalists were locked away, alongside many previous figures of the revolution who had since been recast as enemies, and these figures would not be able to participate in public life until the defeat of the Revolution.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Merle Collins, perhaps Grenada’s most prominent writer, was deeply involved with the revolution and this shaped her writing profoundly. During the Revolution, her poems like “The Lesson” (1982) celebrated what Dilger calls “a new self-confidence attained through the revolution”.[[16]](#footnote-16) Her later novel *Angel* (1987), tells the story of a young woman named Angel and her mother Doodsie, covering the period of 1951 to 1983, and using the struggles of the eponymous character to reflect the wider experience of Grenada as a nation. Collins uses a very wide range of language to reflect the complexity of Grenadian linguistic expression, shifting beteen English and French based Creole, standard English and French, Grenadian English, and American English. The struggle to find a voice, and the theme of bad talk features prominently, with Angel exclaiming “He not talkin bad. He’s speaking a different language, that’s all. It’s no better or no worse than English”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Angel reflects the shifting relationship the Revolution had with Creole, whilst upholding its commitment to folk tradition. Her relationship with Gairy, Bishop, and her father is also triangulated as she struggles with her father’s initial support of Gairy while she supports the revolution – bringing the political conflict into family life. Facing the aftermath of the Revolution, Collins’ poem “Shame Bush” (2003) directly tackles the silence and question of complicity surrounding its destruction, and the poem “Nearly Ten Years Later (For Grenada)” (1992) builds on this mourning even further:

nearly ten years later,  
look at me here analysing,  
still distraught and debating,  
sympathising synthesising  
regretting and remembering  
and time  
just passing.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Mourning the revolution and facing the emotional trauma of what had happened in personal and political terms features very strongly in Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996). A Trinidadian-Canadian who had been living in Grenada during the revolutionary period and working for a non-profit, Brand was attracted to the internationalist character of the revolution like many other left-wingers who moved to Grenada to support the PRG. The novel explicitly distances itself from the language of Western liberalism in favour of anti-imperialist critique, with Greg A. Mullins expounding that “the distance from rights talk also signals Brand’s distance from liberal, reformist remedies to economic and political structures of violence and exploitation.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The novel tells the story of between two women, Verlia and Elizete as a metaphor for political camaraderie and community, and when Verlia dies – a metaphor for the death of the revolution, Elizete travels back to Canada to find Verlia’s former lover and connect with her and tell her story. Thus, the death of the revolution is seen to not have been in vain, as the struggle of international sympathisers abroad, united in a pan-American struggle against imperialism, keeps its memory and ethos alive.

Alongside literature, theatre began to flourish as a shared form of collective political understanding and experience of the Grenadian people, with regional drama companies like the National Liberation Theatre, Sistre, We Foute, and the National Youth Organisation emerging. During the revolutionary period, the number of theatrical productions, and the state support of these were astonishing, and workshops in poetry and theatre found a huge amount of official assistance.[[20]](#footnote-20) Grenadian plays were put on throughout the country, and regional ties were strengthened by inviting foreign artists, with the Jamaican women’s branch of Sistre touring Grenada in 1982, and the Trinidadian calypsonian Black Stalin performing at a benefit for the PRG in the same year.[[21]](#footnote-21) The government gave a huge amount of financial support to theatrical productions, and insisted that employers give their workers paid leave if they were acting in a play. In this environment, community and professional theatre flourished, featuring strongly at the Festival of the Revolution.

In revolutionary Grenada, music was deeply rooted into the construction of national identity itself. Pool notes that revolutionary calypso had preceded the PRG, with performances accompanying Bishop winning a parliamentary seat in 1977, and an explosion of artists accompanied this – providing an unofficial Creole voice to the revolution, where official leadership usually deferred to standard English.[[22]](#footnote-22) Danielle Sirek also argues that mass group performances enabled an emotional contagion which bonded musicians and spectators into a shared community.[[23]](#footnote-23) Shalini Puri further argues that the culture of the Grenadian Revolution was notable for the affection and intimacy revolutionaries built amongst each other and towards the project itself, terming warmly it “the revo”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Using a distinctly Grenadian narrative voice enabled the rejection of hegemonic American and British values in favour of local ones, Radio Free Grenada (RFG) was established to promote these values, featuring music and plays alongside government information and the some of the most rousing speeches of Bishop, Hudson Austin, and Bernard Coard.[[25]](#footnote-25) Ownership of a revolutionary radio station was particularly important given that before the revolution, Caribbean listeners had limited access to many stations. Spreading radio access around the islands did however require significant planning, and in its drive to spread RFG’s reach, the PRG strengthened its international ties with Cuba, who helped install a 50-watt transmitter in 1982 that extended RFG’s reach to cover the whole Eastern Caribbean.[[26]](#footnote-26) Radio, and Grenadian culture itself, thus became an engine of international cultural exchange and mass mobilisation. When the USA invaded, the RFG building was bombed, destroying its radio news and calypso archives. Thus, the invasion literally and figuratively destroyed the cultural history of the Revolution.

Calypso has a long history in the Caribbean as a reflection of the struggles of workers and ordinary people, particularly during the Labour Rebellions, and it was harnessed as an enabler of revolutionary consciousness, with artists inside Grenada and in the rest of the Caribbean making both overt and subtle references to the revolution. Flying Turkey, one of the most prominent revolutionary calypso singers sang “No, no, no! Imperialism no! / No backward reaction could stop the revolution!”[[27]](#footnote-27) in defence of the Revolution, and was also capable of responding to severe challenges. After the death of three schoolgirls at the Queen’s Park bombing in June 1980, Flying Turkey responded with the song “Innocent Blood” (1980), which mourned the tragedy andrepudiated attacks on the revolution. Furthermore, his song “Grenada Belongs to We” demonstrates the people taking ownership of their own nation through the revolutionary project. This music came to dominate the airwaves on RFG and achieved substantial recognition elsewhere in the Caribbean.

The now iconic “Forward March”, originally a Jamaican song, was reappropriated in revolutionary Grenada, changing the lyrics to suit the revolution, with a wildly popular result. This dynamic approach taken by revolutionaries was clever in how it usurped existing popular culture for revolutionary purposes, and the use of music that appealed to the common people meant a far wider reach for the Revolution’s propagandistic culture. The song was marketed as a “youth anthem” and it came to unofficially be viewed as an anthem of the revolution. The opening lyrics are as follows:

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![[28]](#footnote-28)

Songs like this sought to mobilise revolutionary fervour through popular song and connect the struggles of the Grenadian Revolution to other revolutionary struggles globally and within the Caribbean.[[29]](#footnote-29) Kimalee Philip notes that how even though at times people did not want to “talk politics”, “everyone will do it in song as it allows for the injection of humour and reduces the possibility of physical threat”.[[30]](#footnote-30) Calypso also mobilised people when the Revolution was in danger, and Puri discusses how Scorpion’s 1984 song “The Plain Truth” reminds the listener of the euphoria that accompanied the liberation of Maurice Bishop from house arrest when enough pro-revolutionary forces had amassed to protest his detention,[[31]](#footnote-31) noting in particular the following lyrics:

October 19 the street was filled with demonstrators, eh eh,  
The Comrade Leader was rescued by the people that day,  
They shouting ‘we find we leader, we get we leader,  
The whole nation came out and supported him that day’[[32]](#footnote-32)

These lyrics affirm the popularity of Bishop with many of the people, and act as a piece of oral history detailing just how committed many Grenadians were to him and his cause. The song further tells the story of party divisions, the failure of Bernard Coard, and the eventual curfew resulting from the increasingly precarious political situation, with gunfire featuring in the song as things become steadily more confusing until “They shooting people down/Who went flat on the ground”. This account of the Fort Rupert incident shows calypso music remaining a source of political anger and a way for the revolutionary consciousness to continue producing music in defence of the revolution even after the destruction of the PRG. As Puri further elucidates, Scorpion’s calypso insists that “gunfire remains the moment to contend with; it has echoed through the hills of Grenada and the landscapes of its memory ever since”.[[33]](#footnote-33) The personal, political, and physical scars of Grenada therefore find representation through the calypso format.

Valentino’s 1984 calypso “Saga of the PRA” touches on the same event, but in a far more melancholy tone. It blames Coard and Austin for the end of the Revolution and the Invasion, singing:

Well the guns of the PRA,  
Echoed through St George’s that day,  
To the Army, the people was the enemy,  
Austin and Coard cause a tragedy,  
That will remain for the next century,  
Betray the nation and turn back the Revolution[[34]](#footnote-34)

Puri notes that Valentino’s invocation of the phrase “turn back the revolution” is a particularly interesting use of wording, given how Coard was said to have exclaimed “they’ve set the Revolution back five years” when the people freed Bishop from house arrest, and when Bishop seized the Fort, Coard supposedly said “Oh, God, the revolution is dead”, even as the people liberating Bishop had chanted “no Bishop, no revo!”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here, popular culture clearly connected Bishop with the Revolution, and was capable of reclaiming ownership of the revolution by turning the critical eye and accusing Coard and Austin as having been the ones to themselves “turn back the revolution”.

The Festival of the Revolution was an annual event in revolutionary Grenada that featured a wide range of artistic and cultural performances, alongside political speeches, and was extremely popular with the masses, with over 80,000 people, a third of the Grenadian population, attending in 1980.[[36]](#footnote-36) This was an event promoted with enthusiasm around the islands and in the local press, particular the FWI, and acted as a showcase for state-sponsored artists and a place of cultural exchange for sympathisers elsewhere in the region. The 1981 event was particularly notable given how it featured the legendary calypso musician Mighty Sparrow, Angela Davis, and Cuban astronaut Arnaldo Tamayo (the first Black person in space), demonstrating it to be a space for a vast range of Black voices in the Americas.[[37]](#footnote-37) The arrival of such a diverse cast of guests meant that the Revolution achieved an even greater sense of internationalism, and tiny Grenada became a melting pot of cultural exchanges. Given that the PRG saw culture as a battleground in the international struggle for support, this was a huge victory. In its enthusiastic promotion of united revolutionary festivals, the PRG also tried to harness the mass appeal of Carnival whilst eschewing its anti-authoritarian tendencies. Carnival itself was promoted in strict terms in the press, with FWI emphasising the importance of a more orderly carnival that would depict revolutionary themes. Indeed, the 1981 Carnival’s winning feature was named “Downfall of the Capitalist”, depicting capitalism as a sick man in a wheelchair with a box on its head.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Examining the visual art of the Revolution is problematised by the fact that Grenadian artists did not produce much public work tackling the themes of the Revolution, and Suelin Low Chew Tung notes that it is only in recent years that Grenadian artists have addressed the Revolution.[[39]](#footnote-39) Bishop had attended the Grenadan Artistic Council’s annual exposition in the first year he was prime minister, and presented the first prize. However, despite official statements in favour of the arts, Tung explains that the surviving documentation suggests that the only real state sponsorship of visual art was the educational and propagandistic billboards which covered the islands, and which were managed by the artist Gordon Hamilton.[[40]](#footnote-40) Hamilton, working in coordination with the Centre for Popular Education (CPE), installed up to thirty billboards every year using easily accessible house paint across Grenada, with explicitly political purposes in mind. Tung asked Hamilton if the billboards could be considered to be great art, and he responded that at the time he did not consider them to be fine art, and this is a big part of why he did not document them through photography – he had seen them merely as a representation of the people’s thoughts and feelings rather than as an artistic project, and as an organic expression of revolutionary fervour rather than something worthy of archive.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Puri further articulates that “billboard art became prominent during the Revolution as a means for education and mobilization”,[[42]](#footnote-42) with every aspect of the Revolution requiring illustration to a population that was still in the process of achieving universal literacy. Furthermore, visual art in the billboards expressing Grenada’s solidarity with the whole Black African diaspora through its focus on the liberated Black subject.[[43]](#footnote-43) However, art was not something universally used as a means of disseminating government propaganda, and whilst graffiti and local art often furthered the cause of the Revolution, it was also used by those who were frustrated with aspects of the Revolution and life in Grenada who expressed their annoyances through graffiti – even going as far as producing graffiti supporting the US invasion.[[44]](#footnote-44) Visual iconography did however become iconic of the revolution, and Maurice Bishop’s appropriation of Rastafarian symbolism further endeared him to a movement which had helped promote the NJM, and which did have mass support.[[45]](#footnote-45) Slogans and Africanised images became a recurring feature on billboards and painted murals produced by both the government and the people, and strengthened the revolution’s ethos of Black Power and pan-American unity.

Puri observes how the silence around the brutal suppression of the revolution was replicated in culture just as in politics, with no Grenadian creative writing being set in Grenada between 1983 and 2004, despite the huge burst of creative energy that accompanied the revolutionary period.[[46]](#footnote-46) This silence within Grenada is difficult to reconcile with the joyous outburst of cultural production during the revolutionary period, with direct mention of the Revolution being left to the diaspora after its defeat. However, it is clear that through poetry, journalism, educational engagement, music, theatre, and visual art, that the cultural output of the Revolution was a potent force that helped sustain the PRG, protest its defeat, and mourn its loss in overt and covert ways. The patronage of the state and the enthusiasm of the population created a symbiotic relationship where a new anti-imperialist collective Grenadian culture emerged, and even the brutal defeat of the Revolution and its surrounding silence can’t fully erase the traces of this unique moment in Caribbean cultural history.

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