

Jacqueline Bishop and Dolace Nicole McLean

WORKING OUT GRENADA: AN INTERVIEW WITH MERLE COLLINS



DOLACE: Merle, thank you so much for meeting with us and for doing this. I guess my first question is, What was it like growing up in Grenada?

COLLINS: It's a huge question. I have to think of how to narrow it down. I went to Catholic high school. I can talk about what it was like while it was happening and what it is like looking back at it. While it's happening you're OK. You're with it. Looking back at it now, I can see that there was a lot of racism. A lot of condescension. In a sense, it is amazing to me that I didn't see it at the time. Looking back now, it all seems so clear. On the other hand, of course, you were also very conscious that you had this tremendous opportunity to be at what was considered one of the best schools in the country. So your main concern was to make your parents proud.

DOLACE: Some of your work deals with these little girls who are trying to find themselves within certain kinds of communities. Was it a similar process for you?

COLLINS: I come from a family, which was working its way through the ranks of the working class, and early on there were these two voices. There was the voice of the school system, which was the proper voice. And then there was the voice of the community, which was considered, often even by those using this voice, foolishness. That second voice was considered the voice that didn't have a lot to teach. It was only

later that I learned to value that voice. When I went to university in Jamaica that experience (of both voices) helped me to look at all of the issues of class, and of inheriting various aspects of the island in a certain sense.

DOLACE: Well, you talk about inheriting the island, right? It seems that inheriting the island is more than just what kind of space you occupied physically but also the kinds of psychological and social messages that you got growing up as a child. But at some point, the consciousness of that inheritance gets displaced and that would be with the Jamaica experience, you would say?

COLLINS: Yes, yes, I would say with the Jamaica experience I came to have a different sense of self. I came to be more conscious of the psychological and social messages I got growing up, to question them and examine them. Jamaica in the early 1970s made me conscious of myself as a black person and of my inheritance as a Caribbean person in the world.

DOLACE: What was it like going to the University of the West Indies at the time that you went? What was your experience of Jamaica?

COLLINS: For me, it was a tremendous experience. I went to UWI in Jamaica because, like my character Angel in my first novel, I wanted to get as far away as possible within the Caribbean and “as far away as possible” was found at UWI Jamaica.

Jamaica itself was, in a lot of ways, very important for me in terms of development of ideas. That was the period when I--I already knew that I had an interest, for example, in some aspects of academia and in art - I already knew that I had an interest in theater. In Jamaica I did more with that, became part of the university theater group and did some acting. I was also exposed to different artistic expressions – Jamaican theatre, the poetry of Louise Bennett, the group Mystic Revelations of Rastafari, and the ascendance of reggae. This was also Jamaica immediately after Walter Rodney had been expelled. So there was a lot of political discussion---general discussion of socio-political thought in the Caribbean. I wasn't in Social Sciences but most of my friends were and I would go and sit in on Trevor Monroe's lectures, and talk to my friends who were doing

Sociology and Economics and all of that. It was really a very exciting time both in terms of the artistic expression and other things that were going on---politically very formative for me. At UWI, too, I discovered West Indian literature because they had a course at the time that was called that - West Indian Literature - and also African Literature. Then I took courses with Dr. Eddie Baugh on the Victorians. And this was also when Kamau [Brathwaite] came out with “Islands”, “Rights of Passage” and “Masks.”

Kamau’s work helped some of us to sort out things. I remember hearing Kamau read “The Dust” at the Creative Arts Center and realizing that there's another voice for poetry, but still not knowing how I would use that voice in poetic expression. The first thing that I remember writing on paper, leading me to think of myself as a writer, was after UWI when I went back to Grenada and there I wrote a short story called “The Walk.” That was the first time I started to think seriously about the possibility – well, more about writing than about the possibility of becoming a writer. But I still didn't know where to go with that interest ---and that was 1975.

JACQUELINE: So, Merle, just clarify some things. You left Grenada what year?

COLLINS: First of all in 1969. I was at Mona between 1969 and 1972. After completing my first degree, I went back to Grenada, and left in 1974 to teach in St. Lucia. I returned to Grenada after one year and taught at Mac Donald College in St. Patrick’s until 1977 or 1978. I ended up leaving Grenada again in 1978. I left because, having done English and Spanish earlier at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, I decided that I wanted to do some more with Spanish. Generally, it was an exploratory period, a period of testing my various interests to figure out which one or which ones I wanted to settle with. So I went to Mexico, spent six months in Mexico and then came to the United States because I decided I wanted to do Translation and Interpretation. I ended up doing a master's in Latin American Studies in addition to a certificate in Translation at Georgetown University.

DOLACE: In 1979 there were a lot of demonstrations in Grenada. Tell us more about 1979 and the demonstrations of that period.

COLLINS: Not just 1979, actually – the 1970s. 1979 was the year the New Jewel Movement took over the government. It was a strange period. Even talking about it now sometimes people say Grenadians were demonstrating because they didn't want independence. But really, the demonstrations were because people were generally unhappy with the Gairy regime which was in power at the time in Grenada---and the perception was that Gairy was mainly concerned with having as much power as possible within Grenada in order to continue a regime of repression. So that's what people – in an overwhelmingly youthful population - were demonstrating about. Not wanting Independence under Gairy. Also, all of this was happening during the period of the 1970s when a lot of things were happening in the world. People were becoming aware of the fact that they could demonstrate and express themselves against the socio-political conditions in Grenada at the time. People were voicing their reactions against, for example, the repressive attitudes of Gairy and against colonial attitudes in the country generally.

DOLACE: The forming of the revolutionary struggle as it were.

COLLINS: Yes. When I eventually went on to do my doctorate in England my dissertation was on Caribbean politics. The specific focus was Grenada and the political development of the island between 1950 and 1979. I stopped at 1979 precisely because at the time that I was doing my dissertation, it was immediately after the traumatic Grenada events of 1983 and I didn't feel I could handle research into the 1979 to 1983 period. It was just too painful and confusing. So I stopped just before the revolutionary period and I didn't deal with the revolution or the invasion or any of that. Basically, in my dissertation, I just wanted to figure out, how did we get here? Meaning how did Grenada get here? I can't say that I figured it out but it was interesting going.

JACQUELINE: Well, you know, looking at your work it's obvious that you haven't figured out the revolution, you still haven't figured out 1983, it seems to me, for there seems to be, in looking at *Angel* for example, something unresolved in that work.

COLLINS: Absolutely. I notice it up here: In my head. It's always something

that I intend to deal with eventually. I wrote a poem, which is in the last collection, *Lady in a Boat*, called “Shame Bush” which is basically talking about how the country has folded in on itself – like the “Shame Bush.”

DOLACE: Is there a shame and trauma about the invasion, do you think?

COLLINS: Well, you see---I have to pause because it's not only the invasion. In a sense, it is easier to deal with the notion of the invasion than it is to deal with what came *before the invasion*. I know where I stand on [the invasion]. It's easy: That was wrong. It is what happened *before* the invasion, that's really causing me the trouble, and that is where there is trauma, for me personally.

DOLACE: OK, so let's talk about this trauma because . . .

JACQUELINE: Because it sounds very emotional and very tragic. I don't know if you realize that, but there is a breakdown that happens every time your work approaches the invasion. It just becomes . . .unresolved . . .

COLLINS: Absolutely. I know it. And it really is a kind of incoherence. An incoherence surrounding the invasion. And it happens in conversation as well. So I am not sure where it's going now, but I will try and talk about it.

JACQUELINE: I guess for me, what I don't understand is how did people who had a dream---and what a magnificent dream it was too---end up doing what they did to each other?

COLLINS: Let me take you through it to try and explain it to you and also, perhaps, to myself. Let me just take you through those last few days in my own personal experience. I remember there used to be . . . and this is going to be like storytelling . . . There used to be a Wednesday night oldies and jazz at one of the clubs in Grand Anse. On one particular night, I remember I was driving, some friends and I were going down to the club and on the radio, there was this announcement that Maurice [Bishop] was under house arrest. And we just kind of looked at each other in amazement because it sounded impossible. After the announcement that night, the next day I went to work and we were talking about events. At the time, I used to work at the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs doing research on Latin America, country profiles and that sort of thing for the Government. I was considered a friend of the party and I realized bit by bit that when I entered a room it went silent because the other people in my group wanted to be sure what side I was on. And my colleagues were wondering, where is Merle? Is she with the party or is she with the country and Maurice? By this time Maurice, as far as the party was concerned, was guilty of what the party referred to as one man-ism. I made it clear that I did not agree with the attitude of the party and I absolutely disagreed with the house arrest scenario. Talking to you about it now, I cannot forget that an opinion like that, easily expressed today, had to be voiced in whispers, such was the mood in the country. Unison Whiteman, who was minister of foreign affairs and my boss at the time, called me into his office ---and this is the day before he was killed---because by this time, it's the 18th and they were killed on the 19th. . . . I reminded him that up to two weeks prior, the party kept telling us, that when you hear people out there talking and saying there's a split within the party---this is just people trying to mash up the revolution.

He said to me that day in his office, the day before he was killed, "Merle, that was another time. The way things are now I'm going to go to get Maurice out of that house. The way things are now, this is civil war." I may not remember all the words exactly as he used them, but he used those words. "This is civil war."

I said, "What nonsense you talking? You understand what civil war means?"

It was like, all of a sudden, things are happening in such a way that the party---core party members---are now coming out against the party that they had fought so hard to assure the people was triumphant.

JACQUELINE: And what seems so strange to me is that Bernard Coard and Maurice Bishop and all of them were not fundamentally different in their ideologies so . . .

COLLINS: No, but you see, Bernard was always regarded within the party as having more "clarity," even though it was Maurice who was Prime Minister and sort of de facto Head of the party. The issue was that the party should come to a decision so that

Bernard be Head of the party and Maurice be Head of the country i.e. Maurice would be Prime Minister and Bernard would be party leader. You see, Bernard had always been the ideologue, while Maurice had more of a rapport with people. Maurice was more of a people person. The party needed him because he was very charismatic.

So I think what happened is that Maurice decided to break with the party. He agreed to a party decision about joint leadership and then changed his mind after thinking it through and realizing that it would in effect be stripping him of authority. Technically I guess you could say that Maurice was wrong---this man, who has been supporting the party all along, is now changing his tune and going against a decision made by the party he has agreed is more important than any individual. He changed his mind about the role of the party. That, to my mind, was where the major conflict was.

JACQUELINE: I still don't understand however, how you moved from these two people, who share the same ideology and same beliefs and all sorts of things to house arrest and subsequently murder and killing someone.

COLLINS: That's where I also become incoherent, because I do not know. I do not understand how it got to that point. That's why the invasion was in a sense so welcomed by Grenadians, because people were so traumatized that any devil from outside was welcome. . .anybody from outside was welcome. This was all so confusing and traumatic for me that I tried to sort some of my thoughts in writing, in my first novel *Angel*, which came after the events in Grenada in 1983. How I came to write the novel is that I had gone to England to get away from it all and I was doing a Ph.D. in Caribbean governments, but all the events - everything that had happened in Grenada - were occupying every possible space inside, in my head. And the Ph.D. was one kind of a voice, but I didn't have space for a lot of other voices that were occupying my consciousness, yes. And in a sense those voices had to come out. So that sometimes on my way from a class or from somewhere else I would be sitting on the train - and this is really how *Angel* happened - I'd be sitting on the train just busily writing [*Angel* is written largely by long hand], writing these stories, grappling with the voices in my head,

the stories that needed to come out.

In fact, what I was researching, in an academic sense, was covering the same period in *Angel*. And so it was a lot of voices talking through where we have been, and that is how *Angel* came - the characters just tumbling over each other out of my head.

JACQUELINE: I want to know what was it like trying to publish the novel in that Creole voice and if today you think it was the best thing to do?

COLLINS: At the time it wasn't so hard to get the novel published in that voice because it was post-Grenada revolution and the publisher was looking for that kind of voice from Grenada as well. In fact, Women's Press [the publisher] had said to me at the time, that when your book is finished let us see it. So when *Angel* was finished and I showed it to them they didn't hesitate really to publish it. Was it the best thing to do, to write in that Creole voice? For me, it was the only thing to do at the time. It was the way I could feel close to my characters and hear them clearly.

DOLACE: Something else interesting happens in *Angel*---competing ideologies [are] at work. The whole revolutionary excitement [versus] the reality of people's lives.

COLLINS: YES - with *Angel* there are competing political ideologies at various levels. In the novel there's an argument between Angel and her mother Doodsie and you can see where Angel is going with her political theorizing, while Doodsie's attitudes and actions are informed by things which are more real because she is dealing with the real every day thing of what the children have to eat. I am always concerned about those things. Not always to shout people down because they don't have what you consider progressive political views. They are the ones on the ground dealing with their own issues. It's not all about what is considered correct in political struggles, sometimes it is about very pragmatic decisions.

DOLACE: Well, speaking of language and entering into the voice of the character, by the time we get to the second novel it is more accessible. What I want to understand the most about the protagonist, Carib, in your second novel, is her enigmatic phrase "blue is the color of forgetting."

COLLINS: What I was trying to get at in my second novel *The Color of Forgetting* is the way in which blue, Caribbean blue---the blue skies, blue seas, blue whatever is often constructed as the color of the Caribbean---the place where one goes to for forgetfulness or “paradise” or that sense of peace and getting away from it all.

DOLACE: So even though the language is a little easier there is the symbolism being much more difficult in the second novel.

COLLINS: Right! The novel is supposed to show that there’s something more behind the blue, within it.

JACQUELINE: And how did that novel come about, *The Color of Forgetting*?

COLLINS: That came about because of a sense of the Caribbean as being enveloped in a construction of forgetfulness, of the tourist paradise, and even within the islands themselves, Caribbean people often don’t really appreciate what we have. It’s also another step towards working out Grenada. It’s part of my sense that we’re so concerned with constructing things for those who rush to the Caribbean for its “forgetfulness” quality, so much so that we don’t preserve the things that are important to our own spirit.

For example, in *The Color of Forgetting*, there is a scene starting at the top of this hill and it’s really bush all around. But yet this hill, Leapers’ Hill, is supposed to have this glorious history because it is the place that Caribs leapt from supposedly to their deaths on the rocks below in defiance of colonial advancement. That has to represent something seminal for Grenada. This place where people are leaping to their deaths in defiance of the colonial invaders rather than be captured. So that’s the image I kind of wanted to start with. And I wanted to start from that image, to move from that to where towards the end of the novel you have. . .

DOLACE: The cruise ship passengers?

COLLINS: Right. You have the cruise ship passengers coming in and what that looks like. There are also other images scattered about at the end of the novel. Because you also have the monument to a great power, and all of that, but where is the monument

to the Caribs? It seems that it is always what is inside that is supposed to be preserved for ourselves and the growth of our spirits and our self-esteem that's not really being preserved.

DOLACE: You also seem to be working on something about not just Grenada as a political unit, but Grenada even just as a geographical space.

COLLINS: Yes, absolutely. In *The Color of Forgetting* - the struggle between brothers that takes place in that book, over land, is, in a sense, a very contemporary struggle. So it is nothing new. Brother has killed brother in land confusion before today. And it's as if that very land confusion moved to a different stage in 1983 in Grenada.

JACQUELINE: So the invasion was another level of this land confusion?

COLLINS: Yes, it's another level of it, but it's the same battle. This battle for the land in one case, in the novel for an acre of land; in another case for the entire country.

DOLACE: Competing ideologies, again Merle.

COLLINS: Yes, at different levels, within a family, within the country, within a political party, but competing ideologies. Political leaders, especially sometimes the male political leaders, because they are the ones who have had the opportunity at leadership, are very often out of touch with what people consider their essence. One of the things happening in that novel is that the political leaders are encouraging people not to an acre of land because it is uneconomic. People are simply saying hey, look, in a situation where we have never been able to own historically, you couldn't own your acre because it belonged to the master, having even half an acre of land is important to me.

DOLACE: Politics versus the reality, the competition between what is real and what it is that people kind of romanticize about the islands.

COLLINS: Right. So that in a sense, OK, perhaps this economic thing is sense and truth, but it's grand political sense and probably ideologically it's right on, but you have to find a way of working with the fact that because of people's social history it

doesn't make sense to them.

DOLACE: Do you think there's still a trauma in the Grenadian psyche? With the U.S. invasion and all?

COLLINS: Oh, yes. But I'm listening to you and thinking that what is traumatizing the Grenadian psyche is really not so much the invasion as what happened before. I really don't believe that the invasion is traumatizing the Grenadian psyche so much as what led to it. Brother killing brother. That is what is so traumatic for Grenadians.

JACQUELINE: You know, Merle it sounds as though---you are trying to articulate what exactly happened. And now you are able to slowly and slowly to talk about it . . . Where is he buried anyway, Maurice Bishop?

COLLINS: What? That is the real trauma for no one knows! There is a memorial to him in St. George's, but it's not in terms of where his bones are buried! At one stage there was a lot of talk about the recovery of the body but not much came of it. That is still a big thing for Grenadian people so that even, you know, today people could rally around where the body is buried in a symbolic sense.

JACQUELINE: No burial?

COLLINS: No, there has never been a funeral or the body being laid to rest in that sense. No one knows – officially - what happened to the bodies of those that were killed! In a small island like that, though, everyone knows – speculation, hearsay, whispers – but there has been no official declaration.

DOLACE: The resolution that is still lacking . . .

COLLINS: That is the resolution that is lacking still, yes....

DOLACE: Do you think you miss the Caribbean? I know you're nostalgic for it.

COLLINS: Oh, yes. But there it is. For me it's always---it's a question of always returning and always leaving. That is really what happens for me. Always returning, but ever leaving.

DOLACE: Has anything happened recently that could bring you back to Grenada to keep you there? Why can't you stay?

COLLINS: Perhaps leaving is also a part of learning. And there are realities--- there are painful realities in the Caribbean that you want to escape, but you don't want to escape them for good. You want a break to come back.

JACQUELINE: I mean it's not a bad thing necessarily.

COLLINS: I don't think it is. I really don't. At one stage I did think that it was.

JACQUELINE: Really? Why?

COLLINS: Because you're constantly outside. I always felt that I had to explain why I'm not inside. I no longer feel that way because I think that outside teaches you a lot as well and I know that I will always be returning.

JACQUELINE: Which of course leads me to what you're working on now.

COLLINS: It's a novel and of course it's set in Grenada. It's still working out Grenada, but it started coming after the death of my father.

DOLACE: This is an awful question, but it's supposed to be provocative. What is there to preserve about Grenada? Why Grenada with its failed Revolution? Why should we care?

COLLINS: You know, it's all about the human condition. To me when I do all of that recreating of Grenada situations and of the Grenada space and of the experiences and so on, I am understanding not only myself and other Grenadians, but humanity. Grenada is where a small portion of humanity, the small portion of humanity that's responsible for my socialization, is centered. And that is of such tremendous importance for me personally, for me in the world, for all of those people there and for an understanding of self and society.

I remember Lorna Goodison talking about reading a poem about her mother somewhere in Italy and somebody jumping up and saying, oh that is my mother's situation exactly! And Lorna responded saying that, "Imagine I write my poem from

Jamaica and this man in Italy saying it's his mother's situation exactly! How is that possible?" And moving on from that to, yes, it is entirely possible because in a sense in so many different ways, our own little thing is a concern for so many other things. The great human story.

It's the way in which, for example, talking about the Haitian situation and writing about Haiti and researching Haiti you might ask why Haiti? And yet in so many ways, as one of my students was saying recently and I will call her name, Tanya, because it was her idea, Tanya was saying that as far as Haiti is concerned she chooses as her preferred term the infinite rehearsal, because all of the things that have happened in Haiti have happened in one way or the other in various Caribbean countries. The kind of treachery among leaders, the killings, the repression of the population. . . the invasion, everything. So it's like an infinite rehearsal. I think of that little country Grenada---all of those lessons ever learned there---I think those have been huge lessons for a lot of people worldwide. In 1983, at the time of the internal political collapse and the invasion, people talked about Grenada in terms of Czechoslovakia, and the fact that it happened in such a tiny country doesn't make it any less huge.

DOLACE: The political actually coming back to the personal.

COLLINS: Yes, yes intensely personal and it's always there for me to go back to and try to understand other aspects of myself. For me, working out the story of Grenada is working out the story of humanity, of myself and my being in the world.

JACQUELINE & DOLACE: Thank you for the interview, Merle.

COLLINS: Thank you so much, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful – thinking through all these things. Beautiful.

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