

**The Preconditions of Revolution:  
Merle Collins' *Angel***

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## The Preconditions of Revolution: Merle Collin's *Angel*

Merle Collins' intriguing novel *Angel*, which articulates the growth to political consciousness of its female protagonist, simultaneously traces the evolution of radical nationalist politics in Grenada. Focusing on three generations of Grenadian women, the novel uses the life of the individual as a metaphor for the body politic. Issues of colour, class, gender, (dis)empowerment, voice and identity are explored in this compelling first novel that helps to illuminate the processes of social change in Grenada that culminate in the Revolution and its disillusioning aftermath.

Despite the usual fictional disclaimer - "This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental"<sup>1</sup> - the novel does suggest correspondences between events in the narrative and the general trajectory of Grenadian political history over the three-decade period it documents. Indeed, the novel's two major fictional political leaders do resemble "persons living or dead". We recognize the novel's "Leader" and "Chief" as prototypes, each of a different political stripe, of that recurring figure in regional Caribbean politics - the charismatic leader - whose personal style elicits general approbation (or general revulsion) beyond the reach of ordinary party politics.

Collins' subtle portrayal of Leader and Chief focuses less on delineating two specific individuals and more on extracting the essence of the type. Leader and Chief are not fully realized characters for very good reasons. The politics of representation require particular fictional tact,

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<sup>1</sup>Merle Collins, *Angel*. London: The Women's Press, 1987, title page. All subsequent references cited in text.

especially when the writer is dealing with a subject as sensitive as the Grenada Revolution. Collins, both poet and novelist, effectively uses the mask of artifice to both protect herself and extend her account beyond the merely factual. It is an archetypal tale that she tells; a globalizing fiction. In the words of Doodsie, Angel's mother: "Is the same story all over. Is vye neg on the groun an bakra beke on top. We always startin, always in the beginning.'" (11)

Within the narrative there are embedded songs, proverbial statements, and poems that give the People's perspective on events. These collective fictions, cunningly presented as operating beyond the domain of the controlling creativity of the individual novelist, suggest yet another level of authentication of Collins' fiction. The truth she attempts to articulate is not only her personal vision; the novel affirms a sustained tradition of suffering and struggle and creativity that is encoded in the oral histories of the Grenadian people who speak their wisdom in ritualized song, story and proverb.

It is in the mouth of Sister Miona Spencer, a grandmother and belated student in the Revolutionary Government's literacy programme, that Collins puts a calypsoesque poem that amusingly encapsulates the preconditions of revolution that lead to the rise of the Horizon movement. Sister Miona's introduction of the poem locates the Grenadian struggle within the regional/global context of international movements for political change:

'Long live the struggle! she shouted. There was a scraping of chairs. People leapt to their feet. 'Long live! came the answer. Fists went up into the air. 'Long live the struggle of the Nicaraguan people!'

'Long live!' 'Sisters and brothers, long live  
struggling peoples the world over!' 'Long live!'

Having made the politically correct ritual introduction, Sister Miona proceeds to give a much more personal introduction that humorously underscores the heartfelt nature of her statement; the benefits of the literacy project are acknowledged, but it is Sister Miona's memory, the collective memory of struggle that will sustain her performance:

'Sisters and brothers, this poem that I will do for you I write jus a few weeks ago when ah siddown an really tink bout wey we is today an wey we comin from! I have it in me pocket here, but de eyes not too good today, you know. I forget de glasses, so I hope I could remember it well. But ah sure ah could remember it.'

The language of Sister Miona's heart, as of her poem, is Grenadian Creole, a way of speech resonant with the history of both deculturation and reacculturation. This language, like the French Creole that is used throughout the narrative, is an expression of the collective creative capacities that shape the creolization process. Sister Miona does not really need glasses for vision; her oral insights are sufficiently penetrating. The spirit of Miona's performance is expressed in one of the novel's many proverbs, "Sense make befoh book:"

Ay! Well we try it in '51!  
We say come pa come  
Ting bad for so  
Take up we burden  
We go help you go!

Pa take up we burden  
He take up he purse  
And when he purse get so heavy  
He caan carry de burden  
An hol on to purse  
He throw down we burden  
Down on de groun!  
So we cant im over!  
De Horizon come up  
Pa star go down!  
An we watchin de Horizon  
Like is really a dream  
Becus  
hear, non!  
Me at me age in school again!  
Wey you ever hear dat  
In dis country here!  
Me granchilren in secondary  
Dey not payin a cent!  
Ay! Wey you ever hear dat  
In dis country here.  
So Horizon go on  
We neck an neck wid you  
Don throw down we burden, non!  
We dependin on yu  
Don throw down we burden, non!  
Ting too sweet for dat! (247-48)

Sister Miona's poem is performed at a zonal council meeting, the main burden of which is to deal with reports from the Head of the Water Commission and a representative from the Public Works Department on erratic water supply and on the poor conditions of the roads. The public officials of the Revolutionary Government speak a bookish English, politically obtuse: "Now the position is this. In a situation such as the one in which we find ourselves, there are certain variables to be considered . . ." (249) The speaker is immediately cut off by an impatient listener who forces him to consider the basic variable of comprehensibility:

'Mr Wellington, ah jus want to say dat what you start to say dey ain make no sense, comrade. We want you to break it up! We don want you to wrap up nutting in big word so dat we caan understand. Is information we want, an we want it clear and simple!' (249)

The vivid metaphor of subterfuge employed by this anonymous man is an excellent example of the way in which primarily oral speakers use metaphorical language to convey abstract ideas. The lucid metaphor implies that there may be a clear intention to deceive on the part of the high flown speaker; big words can be used to wrap up/obscure meaning because clear and simple information may prove to be problematic for the bearer of bad news. A female speaker, similarly refusing to be silenced by her lack of literacy, unapologetically goes straight to the heart of the matter: "I just want to say that I in the literacy programme. Not all of us did go to High School, through no fault o we own. So jus give us de ting straight an simple, like, an ting settle.'" (249). A clear threat.

Mr Wellington quickly acknowledges the legitimacy of the criticisms: "'Yes. Yes. I accept that.' Mr Wellington laughed, passing his hand round the back of his head. ' We learnin too, you know. But you're right. You have a point there. I'll break it up.'" (249) Wellington's admission that the leaders of the movement themselves have to learn new ways of speaking the abstract ideology of revolution, points to a fundamental contradiction in the process of transfer of power to the masses. The imported, globalizing language of text-book liberation is often oppressive, if not deliberately alienating. Conversely, the locally produced language of Sister Miona's intimate poem, coming spontaneously out of the specific history of culture contact in Grenada, speaks directly to the people; it frees them up to think about their experience naturally. Intellectual activity is not an alien ideology; it is an everyday function of the Grenadian people's lived reality.

The responses to Sister Miona's poem make this clear:

Sister Miona bowed. Whistles. 'Wo-o-y!' 'The sister really good, you know.' 'Thank you sisters and brothers!' Miona left the stage, walking back down into the audience. People turned, applauding her as she passed by, shaking her hand. 'You could give me a copy of it, sister?' 'Heavy, sister.' 'Yes. Thank you very much, Sister Miona. Sisters and brothers, that is the kind of talent that was there hidin all de time, dat the revolution bringing to light.'

That final self-satisfied comment from the Comrade Chairman of the evening's meeting seems to claim too much for the revolution. The

organizational machinery of the Party may have created a forum for the expression of Miona's insight in the form of performance poetry at a public meeting; but the insights she voices predate the revolution. She speaks with the authority of generations of Grenadians who intuitively understand the circumstances of their own lives. Indeed, the Chairman's long-winded summary of the debate around the Party's failure to provide good roads and a regular water supply is again cut off by dissenting voices: ". . . chair de meetin, comrade, an let de people give dey speech." (250)

Leader's rise to fortune comes at a time in Grenada when people are tired of having their labour exploited by the big landowners. The novel opens with a theatrical event - the burning of the De Lisle estate - which is eagerly applauded by expectant onlookers. The spirit of carnival prevails. With wicked wit Maisie, one of the spectators who works on the estate, reduces the grand scale of events to a much more personal level. Responding to the noises of the fire she laughingly asks:

'All you hear dat? Ah sure is me basket o cocoa an dem dat bawling dey.' Her voice cut through the laughter. 'You hear de juice? You hear how it squelchin scroom, scroom, scroom?' They laughed. Some sucked their teeth. Turned laughing faces in Maisie's direction. They slapped cutlasses against waterboots as they enjoyed the joke. 'Maisie, you could talk too much stupidity!' 'No joke non, cocoa. Ah plant you, ah pick you, ah dance in you, but you so damn ungrateful, you don even know you mudder. Dead, you nastiness! You tink ah wounta ketch you?



'Ho-hoy!' 'Woy!' 'Ah tellyou!' 'Maisie, you don good, non!' 'Ay-Ay!' 'Tongue an teeth doesn laugh at good ting, non! (2)

That final proverbial statement, affirming the necessity of laughter in difficult circumstances, encapsulates the complex mood of the people: anger and a simultaneous capacity to take bad things and make joke.

Maisie's humorous metaphorical description of the burning cocoa as ungrateful children who don't acknowledge their own mother and therefore must be punished, foreshadows the theme of generational conflict that the novel will develop. More importantly, the analogy suggests the distortion of the organic relationship between the worker and the products of labour. The worker, alienated from the fruits of labour is forced to rebel.

Leader, promising reforms in the labour market, rises to power on the backs of unionized workers. It is Doodsie, Angel's mother, who intuits Leader's potential for betrayal.

'That man?' Doodsie put the green bananas down on the dresser. 'Watch youself, you know, Regal. Ah hear you was part o de group dat set fire to dose people plantation. Ah not makin noise. Jus as a sister ah tellin you. Don follow dat man lead too close, you know.' She looked around, found the stained, handleless provision knife and stood leaning against the dresser. Regal said nothing. 'Dat man like a lotta flash. You should o see he weddin in Aruba. Real pappyshow. It was so flashy dey make up a song on it.' (13)

Doodsie's statement is significant on two counts. It suggests that for Leader the showy surfaces of things are more important than substance. Leader's flashy clothes, like the obfuscating rhetoric of the politician, cover up his lack of commitment to fundamental social change. He, like his wedding, is a real pappyshow. Further, the statement reminds us of how anonymous song is used as an instrument of censure and satire in Caribbean societies. A derisive song, taken up in full voice by a whole society, becomes an effective substitute for more formal sanctions.

It is also Doodsie who in a letter to a friend abroad summarizes Leader's fraudulent career as union organizer; she points to the failure of the electoral system to effect change when the homogeneity of candidates makes voting pointless:

We friend Leader reach the top where he was aimin for and he have a lot of support but me, I not supportin him at all. Allan does say is because I just playing big. Ezra, that man Leader just want everything everything for himself. His union is a big thief organisation. On all the estates people have to make purse to him regularly. And now he is big hefe too. I feel that what the paymasters do is when they see they have to raise pay they just bought him out by taking him into their company. With the election he become big man in Grenada and some of these very same paymaster kind of people is senators and now when the people get squeeze by the paymasters there is no one to turn to because he Leader is in whisky company with them. Anyway

is as if people feel that because Leader in power they in power so things quiet. Between me an you, girl, I never even bother to vote. I did well want to vote when was the first election because for the first time everybody could have a say but to tell the truth I didn even know who to vote for. (53)

The letter format allows Collins to demonstrate on an intimate scale, and in the voice of the people, the significance of events that are occurring in the wider society. It is Doodsie, for whom letter-writing is an act of intimacy, who chides her husband for wanting to be too particular about spelling when he's writing a letter to a friend: "Advancement! Advancement, Doodsie! Dat have an "e" in it? Two "e" or one? Ah does never remember.' 'Well, advance have an "e". Don mine. Is a letter. Not a exam.' (44) The real exam is knowing which political leader to vote for.

The proverbial statements used as headings for the sections of the novel that document Leader's rise to prominence tend to be warnings. They indicate that appearances can be deceptive. The warnings are complemented with philosophical statements that indicate the need for caution in trying to effect change:

When better can't be done let worse continue  
 Not all skin-teet is good grin!  
 Gade mize mwen, non! (look at my trouble)  
 Take win but you lose  
 Not all wag-tail is promise not to bite  
 Sa ki fe'w? (what's happening?)  
 One day one day congote

Nutting doesn't happen before its time  
 Look at de fingers on you hand! All of dem different  
 length!  
 Someting in de mortar besides de pestle!  
 You never get more dan you can handle  
 Someting boun to turn up  
 Spinnin top in mud  
 Empty crocus bag caan stan up  
 Make sure you no livin on nobody eyelash so dat when dey  
 wink you fall  
 Somebody walkin over my grave  
 Keep a eye out for de rain if you know you have clothes  
 outside  
 Allyou blow shell! Stranger in de place  
 Never trouble trouble until trouble trouble you! But if  
 trouble attack fend for yourself  
 Sometimes you have to take de worse an call it de best

Indeed, the Grenadian people are forced to take the worst and call it  
 the best. They follow Leader because he is the best option they have at  
 the time:

Up on the hill, Leader clapped and sang too as the  
 voices merged in a confident dirge to fast-fading  
 days:

'We shall over co-o-ome  
 We shall over co-o-ome  
 We shall overcome  
 Some day-ay-ay . . . '

And as they sang Leader shouted: 'We shall stand together, we shall die together!'

The crowd roared its approval, chanted its approval of this new hope in song:

'We shall never let our leader fall

Cause we love him the best of all'

Leader's slender form, dressed all in white, move gracefully on the balcony in front of the Parliament Building.

'Watch im, non! Watch boy, non! one woman shouted.

'Dat is man!' (24)

Leader held up both hands, a calm gesture demanding silence. His spotless white suit glistened in the sunshine.

'He look like Mr De Lisle, eh! Maisie whispered to her companion. Is just so Mr De Lisle does dress neat when he playin tennis!'

'Yes. Or when he goin on de golf course. De only ting is he prettier dan Mr De Lisle!' (24)

Retribution is swift once the people come to recognize Leader's ideological resemblance to Mr. De Lisle. Again, it is Maisie who makes the subversive comparison. Leader's downfall is heralded by irreverent song:

'Run Leader Run!

The people's on your way!

Run Leader Run

For a spot in an open ba-a-ay!

You got to drown youself dey

Hide youself wey

Lewwe pull we country straight!

Run Leader Run . . .'

The tune spread throughout the crowd. People knocked bottles, picked up sticks, knocked them together, blew the tune on bamboo flutes. Two steelbands had come on the march. The women and men flashed their pan-sticks, picking out the tune.

(210)

Another pointed song invites Leader to experience first-hand the problems that the suffering people have to face:

Leader-o-o-oy-y!

Me bucket have a hole

In de centre!

An i-i-if you tink ah tellin lie!

Push you finger!

Leado-o-oy!

Me rooftop have a hole

In de centre!

An i-i-if you tink ah tellin lie

Spem a night dey!" (211)

Asserting the people's awareness of their collective power, the following song is a clear threat:

'We will always let our leaders fall!

When dey treat us de worst of all!

'We will always let our leaders fa-a-all!

When they treat us

Like shit an all!' (212-13)

The carnivalesque mood of the novel's opening when the De Lisle plantation is burnt recurs as the people take to the streets *en masse* to protest Leader's failure to help carry the collective burden. It is the Horizon movement that engineers the overwhelmingly successful public rally that precipitates Leader's downfall:

Singing the song of the carnival bands Leader had banned from the streets the year before, the bands in which people covered themselves completely in black grease and paint, clattered through the streets with cans, pans horns, celebrating like their African ancestors had celebrated emancipation, parading the blackness that gave so much fear and making sure it left its mark on anything white.

'Ole Ole O

Djab Djab (212)

The self-liberation of the people from Leader's stranglehold is thus contextualized within a long carnivalesque tradition of hierarchy inversion. The diabolical energy of the Djab Djab is the assertion of an emancipatory blackness that seeks to leave its indelible mark on anything white. Dirt thus becomes a sign of power, the antithesis of purity, both literal and ideological.

The Horizon movement will itself become vulnerable to the people's subversive, blackening power. The anti-Horizon songs in the novel indicate that the people are not unanimously committed to purist party politics. The pro-Leader forces assert their right to challenge the policies of the Horizon movement which seem to come from outer space.

This reference to "outer space" with its emphasis on the alienness of the movement clearly contrasts the Revolution with the indigenous traditions of resistance that are annually celebrated in the rites of carnival:

'Horizon, Horizon  
 Go far away ah say!  
 Lose youself in de ocean boy!  
 We go murder you today!'

'Horizon Horizon  
 Wu! Wu!  
 Horizon Horizon  
 Go far away ah say!  
 Horizon place  
 is out dey in space!  
 We don want you here ah say!' (214)

Conversely, the pro-Horizon forces express the difficulties of making the transition from one form of political organization to another in terms of proverbs that affirm the necessity to embrace change:

As long as you have life you could turn you han to  
 someting  
 You have to make a move to help youself! You caan  
 siddown dey like de livin dead  
 Well yes, wi! You live an learn!  
 Man proposes; God disposes  
 Is not everything everything you could believe but some  
 dream trying to tell you something!



Sometimes we have to drink vinegar an pretend we think  
is honey!

Several of the proverbs used as chapter headings in the section of the narrative that immediately precedes the coup focus on the children as the hope for change. These proverbs optimistically assert the necessity for radical social transformation, and affirm the possibility of a viable alternative to Leader's dissembling, pappyshow politics:

If wasn for de chilren, eh!

Ah have nutting to leave for you when ah dead. All ah  
have is in you head so make de best of it!

Ah give as much as ah could, chile, an den you on you own!

We lookin to you young ones to raise we nose

Open up you head an take in what dey teachin you! But  
don get grand grand an do as if you foot caan touch de  
groun! dat is wey you ha to walk!

You of age to see after youself now! So pull up you socks!

Some potato jus doesn follow de vine

The mud dey take an make you dey, dey throw it away  
when dey finish

Me? I always in de middle like a maypole, an both sides  
pullin!

Never damn de bridge you cross

The proverbs used in the sections of the narrative that recount the heyday of the Revolution are generally optimistic:

When God caan come, he does send

We doin we own ting!

Everybody puttin dey grain o salt!

You tink was a easy lesson?  
 Pwangad waya pike mwen! (Take care lest the wire  
 pricks me)  
 Is a sure sign! Enemy in de bush  
 We runnin neck an neck wid you!

The trauma of the implosion of the Revolution and the opportunistic Invasion is effectively recorded in proverb:

Papa-met oh! (exclamation, literally, my father)  
 Secure allyou fowls! Galin in de area!  
 Tout moun ca playwai! (everyone is crying)  
 None of us din born big!  
 When water more dan flour!  
 The Bush-gram busy  
 Never say never!  
 It have more ting is (sic) dis world dan what we know  
 about  
 Today for policeman, tomorrow for tief  
 Look how trouble could come right inside people house an  
 meet dem eh!  
 In cow-belly crossways!  
 Don look so see who behind you! Look in front to make  
 sure you see wey you goin!  
 You not no egg, girl! You caan break so easy!  
 We never get more dan we can handle!

A particular poignant metaphor is that of the invasive, predatory galin swooping down on the scattered chickens. Earlier in the novel the

image is used allegorically to affirm the need for cohesiveness to counter the collective enemy:

'Youall so stupid!' Doodsie looked around the yard empty of fowls which were hiding in the bushes, up on the steps, under the house. 'If youall would stay togedder, the chicken-hawk won come down an do nutting! Stupes!' She stamped her foot, distressed, shielded her eyes and looked skywards again. The chicken-hawk had disappeared. Slowly, the fowls began to regroup. Stupes!' (255)

In the spirit of Maisie's perennial capacity to laugh in circumstances of dire distress, the proverb "Today for policeman, tomorrow for tief" philosophically accommodates even the Invasion as part of a dialectical process that is ultimately egalitarian. The proverb can also be deconstructed somewhat more controversially to illustrate how Today's global policeman, becomes Tomorrow's thief, swooping down on lesser nations in acts of extravagant overkill.

Merle Collin's novel *Angel* clearly documents the social conditions in Grenada that lead to the Revolution. It asserts the people's intuitive knowledge of the legitimacy of their struggle to improve their lot in life. Though several folk sayings suggest a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable there are others that articulate the need for radical change. The folk traditions of the Grenadian people thus provide the ideological justifications needed for each stage of political development.

## Appendix

### Proverbs/Proverbial Statements Used As Section Titles

When better can't be done let worse continue  
 Not all skin-teet is good grin!  
 Gade mize mwen, non!  
 Take win but you lose  
 Not all wag-tail is promise not to bite  
 We come out de same crab hole  
 Sa ki fe'w?  
 One day one day congote  
 Nutting doesn happen before it time  
 Look at de fingers on you hand! All of dem different length!  
 Someting in de mortar besides de pestle!  
 One han caan clap!  
 You never get more dan you can handle  
 Someting boun to turn up  
 Spinnin top in mud  
 Empty crocus bag caan stan up  
 You make you children, you don make dey mind  
 Make sure you no livin on nobody eyelash so dat when dey wink you fall  
 Somebody walkin over my grave  
 Keep a eye out for de rain if you know you have clothes outside  
 Allyou blow shell! Stranger in de place  
 Never trouble trouble until trouble trouble you! But if trouble attack fend  
 for youself

Sometimes you have to take de worse an call it de best  
As long as you have life you could turn you han to someting  
Hol you hen  
We ha to hol one another up  
Tim Tim  
You have to make a move to help youself! You caan siddown dey like de  
livin dead  
If wasn for de chilren, eh!  
Ah have nutting to leave for you when ah dead. All ah have is in you head  
so make de best of it!  
In a bush, in a bush In a bush where beasts can talk  
Vini ou kai vini, ou kai we!  
Suffer the little children  
Once in a blue moon  
Don play de ooman wid me  
Make de most of you young days, chile! You doh know how lucky you is! Dey  
won come back again!  
Ah give as much as ah could, chile, an den you on you own!  
We lookin to you young ones to raise we nose  
Well yes, wi! You live an learn!  
What is joke for schoolchilren is death for krapo  
Man proposes; God disposes  
One one cocoa full basket  
Say it loud! I'm Black and I'm proud!  
Open up you head an take in what dey teachin you! But don get grand grand  
an do as if you foot caan touch de groun! dat is wey you ha to walk!  
You of age to see after youself now! So pull up you socks!

Some potato jus doesn't follow de vine  
 The mud dey take an make you dey, dey throw it away when dey finish  
 Is not everything everything you could believe but some dream trying to  
 tell you something!  
 Sometimes we have to drink vinegar an pretend we think is honey!  
 Me? I always in de middle like a maypole, an both sides pullin!  
 Never damn de bridge you cross  
 Pli mal. More worse!  
 If you po djab, krapo smoke you pipe!  
 It have more mad people outside dan inside . . . more tief too!  
 When God caan come, he does send  
 We doin we own ting!  
 Everybody puttin dey grain o salt!  
 You tink was a easy lesson?  
 Pwangad waya pike mwen! (Take care lest the wire pricks me)  
 Is a sure sign! Enemy in de bush  
 Someting boilin under de surface!  
 We runnin neck an neck wid you!  
 Papa-met oh! (exclamation, literally, my father)  
 Secure allyou fowls! Galin in de area!  
 Tout moun ca playwai! (everyone is crying)  
 None of us din born big!  
 When water more dan flour!  
 The Bush-gram busy  
 Never say never!  
 Sense make befoh book  
 It have more ting is (sic) dis world dan what we know about

Today for policeman, tomorrow for tief

Look how trouble could come right inside people house an meet dem eh!

In cow-belly crossways!

Don look so see who behind you! Look in front to make sure you see wey  
you goin!

You not no egg, girl! You caan break so easy!

We never get more dan we can handle!