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The Small Axe Project consists of this: to participate both in the renewal of practices of intellectual criticism in the Caribbean and in the expansion/revision of the horizons of such criticism. We acknowledge of course a tradition of social, political, and cultural criticism in and about the regional/diasporic Caribbean. We want to honor that tradition but also to argue with it, because in our view it is in and through such argument that a tradition renews itself, that it carries on its quarrel with the generations of itself: retaining/revising the boundaries of its identity, sustaining/altering the shape of its self-image, defending/resisting its conceptions of history and community. It seems to us that many of the conceptions that guided the formation of our Caribbean modernities—conceptions of class, gender, nation, culture, race, for example, as well as conceptions of sovereignty, development, democracy, and so on—are in need of substantial rethinking. What we aim to do in our journal is to provide a forum for such rethinking. We aim to enable an informed and sustained debate about the present we inhabit, its political and cultural contours, its historical conditions and global context, and the critical languages in which change can be thought and alternatives reimagined. Such a debate we would insist is not the prerogative of any single genre, and therefore we invite fiction as well as nonfiction, poetry, interviews, visual art, and reviews.
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Preface:
The Silence People Keeping

David Scott

Look is twenty years and the nation still hurting
People playing a waiting game, they just not talking
Is hard if men suffering on the hill for things they didn’t do
People not relenting because they have their memories too
Dust don’t disappear when you sweep it behind bed
People stay quiet but all the questions in their head
Is true time could heal and bad times could change people mind
But we have to figure how to talk, leave the hurt behind
And if you bright and reading plenty book
You must realize how the silence must look

Because touch shame bush
see how it curl inside itself
Watch shame bush
see how it close to defend itself
Study shame bush, if you really do that reading
you will understand the silence people keeping
—Merle Collins, “Shame Bush”

It seems likely that the distinguished commissioners of the belatedly released Truth and Reconciliation Commission report have not read their Merle Collins, and so have not had the benefit of her subtle, humane, questioning way of evoking for us—here but also elsewhere in her work—the particular poetics of trauma and memory that constitute the beleaguered
predicament of contemporary Grenada. Quel dommage! Because that “silence people keeping” is a silence fed by anger as much as by fear, by a sense of betrayal as much as by the pain of loss, by denial as much as by the absence of redress; and it may be that to properly hear what those voices know and can tell requires conditions of saying and of listening other than those effected by the commission and the powers that authorized it.

The Grenada TRC, first announced by the prime minister Keith Mitchell in early 2000, was finally (after much delay) appointed in September 2001 and consisted of three persons: the chairman, the Honorable Donald Trotman, former judge of the Supreme Court of Guyana; the Right Reverend Bishop Sehon Goodridge, Anglican Bishop of the diocese of the Windward Islands; and the Reverend Father Mark Haynes, administrator of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in St. George’s. Its terms of reference mandated it to “inquire into certain political events” that had occurred in Grenada between January 1976 and December 1991. Central to its mandate, then, was an investigation into the events leading up to the overthrow of Eric Gairy on 13 March 1979 by the New Jewel Movement, the political conduct of the People’s Revolutionary Government while in power (their attitude to political dissent, in particular), and the events leading up to its demise on 19 October 1983, including of course the shooting deaths of Maurice Bishop, Jacqueline Creft, Unison Whiteman, Norris Bain, Fitzroy Bain, Keith Hayling, Evelyn Grant Bullen, and Evelyn Maitland at Fort Rupert (now returned to its colonial name, George). In this respect also, the TRC was to concern itself with the lingering question of the disposal of the remains of those who lost their lives at the fort that day. The absence of these remains and the mystery surrounding their whereabouts has been a particular source of anguish, confusion, and outrage for many in Grenada. The commissioners were charged with reporting their findings and making recommendations to the government within a period of three months of the date of the last hearing of evidence. To this end they began taking evidence in October 2001, and the last witness appeared before them in August 2002.

The aim of the TRC, so the commissioners said, was to provide a platform for the truth-telling that would “create opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation among relevant parties affected by [the circumstances and events under scrutiny]; and that could help to

2. See the exemplary study undertaken by the Young Leaders of Presentation Brothers College entitled Under the Cover of Darkness (St. George’s: Ministry of Education, 2003).
heal wounds so that they do not fester into the future” (1:8). Such was their objective. But alas the best that can be said of the TRC report is that, even by the standards it set for itself, it is a disappointment. It is not just that it is several years late (though that by itself merits a more forthcoming explanation than the one provided), and that its materials are appallingly assembled and organized; it is that beyond a commendable aura of humanity and sobriety, it offers precious little of any substantial “truths” by which to guide the prospect of the “reconciliation” they hope for. Indeed the commissioners are obliged to admit in their introduction that nothing in their report adds anything new to the existing stock of knowledge: “The Commission will be less than frank if it did not confess that during its extensive and intensive inquiry, it unearthed little more knowledge of the truth of facts and events pertaining to the periods under inquiry, than that which was already known” (1:12). The commissioners console themselves, however, that “what is important is that the Commission considered all this information, old and new correlative, and reached its conclusions in accordance with its own deliberate and independent judgment” (1:12). But surely that—deliberation and independent judgment—is the least that we should have expected; it can’t, justifiably, be the grounds on which they solicit our appreciation of their work. In any case, after the TRC report we have no better picture of the past, no better understanding of the nature of the events, and no better idea of the thinking and motivations that informed the various decisions and judgments of those involved in these events. It is the silence people keeping . . .

To be fair, it seems clear from what the commissioners say (in appropriately oblique and guarded language) that the Grenadian government, while duly constituting the commission and providing it with its terms of reference, had very little interest in seeing to it that it was able to carry out the full and serious investigation that was—and is—warranted. They maintain that: “Throughout much of its work, the Commission suffered from several setbacks occasioned by the administration; inadequate logistical accommodation; and some unwilling and uncooperative official personnel” (1:7). However unsurprising this may be, it is lamentable, especially in a matter of such grave concern for peoples’ lives and of such historic importance for Grenada and for the Caribbean region as a whole.3 It only underlines the feeling one has reading the report, that a good deal of cynicism went into the process, and that the case was opened only to be deliberately evaded and thus foreclosed.

3. Besides Grenada, Haiti is the only other country in the region that has so far established a truth and reconciliation commission. The National Truth and Justice Commission was established by former president Jean Bertrand Aristide by executive order in December 1994 to investigate human rights abuses between the September 1991 coup that overthrew him and his restoration to power by the US in September 1994. The report was delivered to Aristide in February 1996. See Fanny Benedetti, “Haiti’s Truth and Justice Commission” at http://www.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/v3i3/haiti33.htm.
Of course, everybody was waiting to hear what the commissioners would have to say regarding the Grenada 17: Bernard Coard, Hudson Austin, Christopher Stroude, Liam James, Leon Cornwall, Selwyn Strachan, Phyllis Coard, John Ventour, Ewart Layne, Colville McBarnette, Dave Bartholomew, Lester Redhead, Cecil Prime, Cosmos Richardson, Andy Mitchell, Vincent Joseph, and Callistus Bernard. After all, it is scarcely deniable that it is the terrible events of 19 October 1983 that lies at the heart of what stands in need of truth and reconciliation.\(^4\) In view of this it might have seemed self-evident that the participation of the Grenada 17 would have to be crucial to the process and their testimonies essential to a full understanding of what took place on that Wednesday morning and afternoon, and the actions and decisions that led to the catastrophe. However, regrettably, the commission did not even meet with members of the Grenada 17. On the commissioners’ account of it, they were “at all material times available to meet with ‘the 17’ and [are] satisfied that the failure of the several reasonable efforts it made to do so, was not of its own making” (1:37). It is the Grenada 17 who were uncooperative, not they who were neglectful of their public duty to vigorously seek after the truth. But, a cursory glance at the relevant materials collected in volume 2 of their report may lead one to suspect that this is somewhat disingenuous, if not directly misleading. From the outset, it appears, the Grenada 17 welcomed the truth and reconciliation commission, stating in a letter of 5 February 2000 submitted to the committee responsible for organizing the commission: “We wish to state that we stand willing and ready to fully participate in the proceedings of a ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, including giving full evidence and facing cross-examination once it is clear that truth and reconciliation are indeed the objectives of the exercise” (2: appendix 1). And yet it would appear that no contact was made with the Grenada 17 until 4 February 2002 (that is, fully six months after the commission’s appointment), and then by way of a summary announcement verbally communicated to them by the Commissioner of Prisons that the TRC commissioners would be visiting the Richmond Hill Prison within a matter of hours to hear their testimonies. Needless to say the Grenada 17 were much taken aback and much aggrieved by this manner of communication and requested (as was within their right) that any further contacts be made through their legal counsel. It would take a further two and a half months before the commissioners made this contact. In view of this—and given the fact that commission had no powers to grant amnesty to the Grenada 17—it is hard to see what reason they could have had to rest any confidence in the sincerity and impartiality of the TRC.

And yet, the commissioners concede that it would be wrong to be “dismissive and disregarding” of the representations made to them by the Grenada 17’s legal counsel, and “In particular, their persuasive complaint that their guilt and conviction were determined on the basis of an unfair trial” (1:39). Their cautious recommendation reads as follows: “It is in the context of this perspective, therefore, and having regard to the need for both victims of wrong doing and the alleged wrong doers to feel satisfied that justice is done to their respective causes for reconciliation to take place, that the Commission would prefer to see the State provide an opportunity for the ‘Grenada 17’ to access existing or established Courts within the legal system and which would studiously ensure the process of fair trial, regardless of the outcome” (1:40).

5. Now, the moral justification for truth and reconciliation commissions—in the two dozen or so cases that have been established since the 1970s—is restorative justice. The idea, urged increasingly since the end of the Cold War by the international human rights community, is that in the context of conflicted and unresolved histories—histories often of authoritarian regimes or where events of especial violence have occurred—histories where basic truths have been distorted and basic decencies violated, truth commissions can provide a formal, authorized mechanism through which to confront and engage that intractable past. As both perpetrators and their victims unburden themselves, it is argued, the truth of the past will serve as the basis for individual and national reconciliation, and for the creation of a shared peaceful future. Commissioned remembering, so it is urged, is a modality of collective repair. By pursuing an unbiased reconstruction of traumatic histories and public acknowledgment of gross abuse and atrocity—by setting the record straight—truth commissions hope to overcome the obstacles of systematic denials and sanctioned fabrications, and pave the way for moral redress. But of course this is all more easily said than accomplished—as demonstrated in the justly famed South African case that, in the end, raised as

5. On Wednesday 7 February 2007, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (JCPC) overturned the sentences of the 13 remaining members of the “Grenada 17” (in March 2000, Phyllis Coard had been given permission by the Mercy Committee to go to Jamaica for medical reasons; and in December 2006, three of the “Grenada 17”—Vincent Joseph, Andy Mitchell, and Cosmos Richardson—were released after their 45-year prison sentences were reduced for good behavior). The Lords of the JCPC ruled that the death sentences originally imposed in the cases were unconstitutional and consequently that the process by which those sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment was also invalidated. The final paragraph of the judgment, paragraph 34, reads as follows: “Their Lordships do not think that in practice the relief sought by the appellants in relation to their sentences was ever available through the ordinary avenue of appeal. They will therefore humbly advise Her Majesty that this appeal should be remitted to the Supreme Court of Grenada for the appellants to be sentenced in accordance with the construction of section 230 of the Criminal Code which their Lordships have indicated, taking into account the progress made by the appellants during their time in prison.” The Privy Council Ruling can be viewed at: http://mikebas.blogspot.com/2007/02/privy-council-ruling.html.
many questions as answers. For quite apart from the central framing issue of the political will to enable the process to go forward with the least interference and with the necessary administrative as well as moral support, there are hard (and perhaps not entirely resolvable) conceptual and methodological questions about the “truth” and its pursuit: What are the requirements for historical truth to be arrived at? What precisely is the relation between the two virtues of truth and justice, and what is the scale in which their balance is to be determined? What is the relation between official records and personal testimony in the construction of objective truth? What is the relation between the “political” and the “criminal” as registers of violation? What is the relation between the individual and the collective in the identification of a victim? What counts as disclosure sufficient for amnesty? These and a host of other similar questions have at least to be articulated and engaged in order for this process to be really worthwhile. But perhaps more than anything else, truth and reconciliation commissions only have a chance where they are part of a larger project of transition (if not transformation) to what is seen and felt by most people to be a new social, economic, and political dispensation—truth and reconciliation commissions are best thought of as modes of transitional justice. Without that horizon of possibility before them, there can be little real incentive for people to give up the silence they feel obliged to keep. Can this be said of the context of the Grenada TRC?

The essays—written and visual—that make up this issue of Small Axe are not presented as a systematic effort in rethinking the political history of the period under the purview of the TRC commissioners. That work is doubtlessly necessary and hopefully will get done in the coming years and find its way into our pages. But certainly the work here published has to be read and viewed (as the case may be), separately and together, as work that, in the wake of that traumatic history, seeks to renew the project of making sense of Grenada’s past and present. They are, each of them, a small and significant illustration of ongoing work in a part of our Caribbean where people sought, against mighty odds, to stand up for social justice and political self-determination, and paid a heavy and perhaps unending price for their courage.

Princeton, January 2007