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## **We navel-string bury here: Landscape history, representation and identity in the Grenada islandscape**

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*“We Navel-String Bury Here”*

**Landscape Biography, Representation and  
Identity in the Grenada Islandscape**

**John Angus Martin**

**“We Navel-String Bury Here”:  
Landscape Biography, Representation and  
Identity in the Grenada Islandscape**

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Completing this dissertation has been a long journey, not just in the time it took from start to finish (ten years?), as it really began many, many years ago, long before I even started researching this specific topic. This part of the journey has led me to many people I am so happy to have met along the way who took the time to laugh and dance with me, the many cool landscapes I got to not just learn about but experience, the numerous things I learned from so many people, and the shared moments that made me content to be in this space with these wonderful human beings. It was truly an amazing journey back to the place where it all began for me, this beautiful island called Grenada and to connect it to my expanding universe across the globe.

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*To Jean and Venis Martin*  
*For their genuine examples that made possible a life of contentment* ♣

**A Dedication**

*To my mother and father*  
*For a Grenadian heritage*  
*Through which flows*  
*The majesty and cloudiness of the Thames*  
*The strength and mystery of the Niger*  
*The natural and mystical beauty of the Highlands*  
*The elegance of the Seine*  
*And the Creolization of a New World.*  
*And as Derek Walcott insists, “either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.”* ♣

# Preface

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## My Search for Identity in the Grenada Islandscape

*“My island home was the place of greatest joy and the engendering of dizzying dreams.  
But an innocent inherits dreams and not the tolerance for bleak reality.  
And as a child in his dreams will embrace the world,  
a man grows up rooted, his identity accrued only with the loss of alternatives.”*

Liam Martin, “Exile,” *The Out Born: Collected Poems, 1980-2016* (2016:1)

I was probably about three and a half years old, or thereabouts. I am running down a steep alley alongside a deep gutter overflowing with rushing water. I am racing along following my “boat” as the water carries it towards the bottom of the alley before it disappears under the roadway and eventually enters the sea beyond the rooftops. The rushing water is a result of the heavy rainfall that just ended, with water gushing down the hillside towards the sea in the distance. You see, the town of St. George’s is built at the base and on the steep inner slopes of an extinct eroded volcanic crater, actually two extinct calderas inundated by the Caribbean Sea. Houses climb precariously like *Moko Jumbies* stilt walking up its precipitous sides towards ruins of 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonial fortifications dotting the encircling rims that once dubiously protected the picturesque town. Streets cut the steep incline at various angles depending on if they are going up or down, but the alleys and the steps run straight down except when interrupted by intersecting roadways. I bring up this memory because it is the first I can recall of me in the Grenadian landscape: of this little boy playing in this nondescript alley, in this small town nestled inside of an extinct, eroded volcanic crater, on a tiny often mispronounced and thus misidentified island in the Caribbean Sea, in an imagined archipelagic paradise trapped between the Americas, and a tiny speck on the face of the globe, who that day began the quest for his place in our vast universe.

There is, however, another reason this memory is important and why it resonates today. A few years ago, I learned something interesting about that drain and why so much water flows through it after heavy rains. It is because it has always been there! That drain, from an earlier ravine, is probably as ancient as the adjacent hills, and part of the volcanic crater that surrounds it and through which it flows. That ancient ravine, now encased in concrete, was a

natural stream originating on the hill three tiers above and has been a part of the landscape, playing its role in carrying out that function for who knows how long. It was important to James Casey (1778) who recorded its name *Ravine Jourdin*<sup>1</sup> on *A Plan of the Town of St. George in the Island of Grenada* (Figure A). Its name was given by the French as it was useful to them following their settlement in 1649 and expansion across the lagoon. Though it does not retain its name today and goes unnoticed by most (except maybe children playing



Figure A: James Casey’s “A plan of the town of St. George in the Island of Grenada,” 1778, with Ravine Jardín inset (courtesy The National Archives, UK)

or those who clean it), the drain maintains its historical function generations after the French who named it and the British who recorded it withdrew from the island, even as it continuously adapts to the changing landscape.<sup>2</sup> I can only speculate as to how the Kali’nago

<sup>1</sup> *Ravine Jourdin* should be *Ravine Jardín*. In 1778 it marked the eastern boundary of the small colonial town.

<sup>2</sup> In a conversation with a colleague recently I was surprised to learn that the drain retains an echo of its former French name as her younger cousin, resident in the area, referred to it as “The Jordan” when she played around it as a child. Thank you Marie Benjamin.



represented this ancient ravine, as well as the earlier Indigenous peoples who most assuredly used it as part of their cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup>

Since that day I have been roaming this island, beginning as that little boy playing in the bushes and fields around my home in the protective shade of the two large tamarind trees, and the ominous shadow of the giant silk cotton tree that overlooked the Caribbean Sea only a stone's throw away. These giant trees and several others like the lime and coconut trees behind my house, the mango and seaside almond trees in my neighbor's yard, and sugar cane on the other side defined my tropical arboreal space along with many bushes that illustrated my childhood viewscape. I ran up and down and over the precipitous streets of the small town that huddled on the inner slopes of the volcanic crater oblivious to the historic footsteps I constantly retraced. I climbed the heights of its hills and mountains and peered through the mist-covered canopy to see into its tangled past. I hiked into its valleys and trekked alongside its streams and rivers, listening to burdened histories disgorged by the turbulent, brown-colored rushing brooks emptying into the sea. I have walked along its beaches and explored the hidden trails into the forests to the rim of a mountain lake where I see reflected in the ripples of time silhouettes of all those who have fashioned this changing Grenada island.

I recall the cultural memories that my mother joyfully passed on to me through the stories of her rural childhood, but especially the ability and desire to remember the past and tell these stories so that they are not forgotten. I recall the stories of my father, of the land and what grew in it, and about the people who loved working on these lands and producing its bounty that enriched their lives. He taught me how to belong to the landscape and understand and appreciate the people who created it. But it was my brother Liam who made me see the poetry in our landscape and taught me to embrace its many voices. And Glaston "Daddy Fletch" Fletcher who shared with me his enthusiasm for and experiences of the Grenadian landscape that allowed me to see far beyond my own understanding and experience the landscape through his eyes. And in all these years I roamed across this island, from its sandy beaches and mangroves on the coasts to its rain forests in the mist-covered mountains, from its valleys to its hills, and the places in between, experiencing this island as I have no

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<sup>3</sup> I use the general term Indigenous (with upper case "I" as is now accepted in the academic literature) in place of Amerindian(s) throughout as I believe, like others, it is a more accurate designation for the various peoples who occupied the region before and since the invasion of Europeans than the misnomer Amerindian (derived from American Indian), despite the latter's widespread use and understanding across the region. When appropriate, I use specific designations such as Kali'na, Kali'nago and "Taino." This should not be confused with the use of "indigenous" with reference to Creole culture in the region (Newton 2013).

other, seeing, feeling, hearing, sensing, remembering... as it slowly and meticulously revealed itself to me throughout a lifetime of exploration, wonderment and identity.

This is the story of my love affair with the Grenadian landscape and the motivation for much of this study, a landscape autobiography I suppose that began decades ago in a small hillside village where I was born. But this life history of the Grenada islandscape, though seen through the perspectives of my own parallel search for identity and a sense of belonging in this creolized island space is the story of all who came before and those who continue to walk beside me on these hidden island trails into the past. This is the tale of a lifelong journey across Grenada (and the world) in search of identity strewn about this veiled islandscape, with its two millennia history of human occupation and impact obscured within an entangled cultural palimpsest. This is a journey to uncover the past in the present, the then in the now, the yesterday in today, the realities in the myths, the wisdom in the traditional knowledge, the lessons in the proverbs, the nuances in the obvious, the simplicity in the complex, and the future in the past. At its core, it is an endeavor to understand how all of our histories, all of our stories, all of our dreams, and all of our memories have impacted this changing landscape we identify with today. And how the *memory-traces*<sup>4</sup> and representations of the past can help us locate ourselves in this creolizing (changing) landscape, furnishing our evolving identities, and creating that desired sense of place, that sense of belonging to the place where our parents, grandparents and godparents symbolically and literally grounded us, in the place they *bury we navel-string*!<sup>5</sup>



Some might question the style and very personal voice of this study as it veers slightly away from the usual academic turn. I did not set out to write it in this way, but once I began to tell this story of Grenada and my lifelong connections and identity with it, it just flowed naturally from my experiences and knowledge onto these pages, creating a more holistic and nuanced telling of this complex story of representation, identity and belonging. It became the only way I could tell this story: in the rhythm and accent as I remembered it being told to me in the

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<sup>4</sup> *Memory-traces (traces-mémoires)* is a term coined by Édouard Glissant to describe the remnants of the past that are still present in the landscape, but specifically created by oppressed or subjugated peoples that history often forgets. He was specifically referring to enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean. Though *memory-traces* can be material or symbolic, they can be explored, uncovered and recognized. These *memory-traces* are our Creole patrimony (Chamoiseau and Reeck (trans.) 2019).

<sup>5</sup> To “Bury we navel-string” is a Grenadian (and Caribbean) expression meant to establish one’s right of belonging or connection to a place (Allsopp 1996). In Grenada, the pronunciation/spelling “*nabel-string*” is more common, but I use *navel-string* as it is more recognizable across the region and the world. More will be said of this practice and its metaphorical application in Chapter 8.

melodic voice of my mother Jean, in the poetic verse of my brother Liam, in the rational reflections of my father Venis, in the revolutionary voice of my (youthful) elder brother Wayne, in the dramatic expressions of my story-telling granduncle Papa, in the soothing cadence of my grandmother Aunty Maude, in the honest words of my aunt Nieta, and in the innocence and forward-thinking of my daughter Yvette. It is told in the language that I dreamt in no matter where I found myself on distant shores that somehow always brought me back to this my tiny island beginning. And in the end, I wanted this story to be of the Grenada storiescape, of my mother and father, of my brothers Liam, Raphael, Wayne and Rex and sister Janice, my niece Natalie Williams, of my childhood neighbor Lionel “Abba” Gibbs, of my cousins Ms. Joslyn Nicholson, Trevor Hercules, Gail Lowe, and Rosamond Payne, of Vero Nicholson and Charles Paul, of my “landscape guide” Fletcher, of my lifelong friends Patrick James, Finbar “Biko” Renwick, Lester “Waxy” Nicholson, Joshua Elahie, Rockim St. Bernard, Teddy Frederick, Shane St. Bernard and Andrew Neckles, and of the many, many others who have shared their stories of Grenada with me over the years. This is my story to them, enhanced with the pieces of their own stories beautifully interwoven into our creolizing experiences across the Grenada islandscape.

So, accept this (self)study for what it is, the story of lived island experiences and their many diverse relations spatially laid out across the centuries, across cultures, across generations, across this tropical Caribbean islandscape (Whyte 2013). This is my story; this is your story; these are our stories. These are the stories of who we were, the stories of who we are, the stories of how we came to be here, and how we all belong to this continuously changing and contested island adrift in this archipelagic dreamscape. This is Grenada’s story!