

FORWARD EVER WITH JACQUELINE CREFT: THE PARADOX OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE CARIBBEAN REVOLUTIONARY LEFT

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Abstract

This paper presents an intersectional analysis that interrogates race and gender in the study of Jacqueline Creft's role in the Grenada Revolution. She was a founding member of the New Jewel Movement (NJM), a leading female figure in the formation and consolidation of the short-lived Grenada Revolution, and the Minister of Education in the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG). From 1979 to her death in 1983, she was responsible for leading one of the most significant successes of the revolution – the campaign to end illiteracy in Grenada. Through exploration of some gendered dimensions of the Grenada Revolution, we attempt to advance the record of Creft's contribution to education and development and rescue her political contribution from historiographical obscurity.

Keywords: revolution; gender; Grenada; Caribbean history.

Introduction

Jacqueline Creft's story is an account of "missing" women in Caribbean revolutions and history. Shepherd (2011, xxi), writing on pre-1960s academic discourses on the region noted that "the teaching and writing of history not only remained an essentially male preserve, but its contents lacked significant awareness of the transformative potential of gender analysis". In consequence, with respect to the Grenada Revolution, Jacqueline Creft's contribution needs more scrutiny. This paper therefore probes the issue of historiographical invisibility of Caribbean women and gendered relationships in the Grenada Revolution through an examination of her role in it. In this way, we seek to explore and "explain women's comparatively distinctive performance" (Toussaint 2011, 689) in Caribbean political history.

Background to the Grenada Revolution

Women and politics in Grenada were inextricably connected long before the Revolution. Women were strongly involved in the politics of Eric Gairy, a populist leader who transformed his labour union into a mass-based political party in 1951. Phillip (2001, 4) observed, "At Gairy's campaign meeting, women outnumbered the men and were on the whole more vociferous in their support... [and] in the 1957 election more women voted than men". From August 1967, Gairy served continuously as Premier of Grenada. His regime became increasingly unpopular and opposition groups emerged to challenge his governance. He had consolidated state power into his own hands, promoted paternalistic politics and "a new authoritarian state emerged" (Grenade 2015, 229). Gairy was deposed through armed revolution in March 1979 by the coalition of the socialist-oriented New JEWEL (Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education and Liberation) Movement, (popularly known as NJM), and the urban-based Movement of the Assemblies of the People (MAP) which had come together in 1974 to oppose his regime.

The Grenada Revolution received recognition from the global Left and propelled its leader, Maurice Bishop, onto the world stage as a Third World revolutionary. The revolution, as Heine (1996, 557) aptly describes it, constituted "the single most advanced effort to bring socialism to the English-speaking Caribbean". After the coup d'état, the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) was installed. The Central Committee and leadership of the PRG were largely recruited from NJM members and loyalists.

The significance of the Revolution has been covered considerably in Caribbean social and political thought (Lewis 1987; Marable 1987; Meeks 1988, 1993; Lewis, Williams, and Clegg 2015). Scholars like Meeks (1993) have described the Grenada Revolution as a "revolution from above"; that is to say, the imposition of a revolutionary project by middle-class state builders upon the popular classes. The Marxist-Leninist pronouncements, radical cultural transformations (and achievements), the assassination of the NJM leadership, and the US invasion taken together provide a dramatic arena for academic study. Nevertheless, there has been little discussion about the significance of the Leftist women in the region (Sanatan 2016). The analytical approaches to these studies are tied mainly to the

historiographical tradition of male authors and their propensity to overlook gender issues.

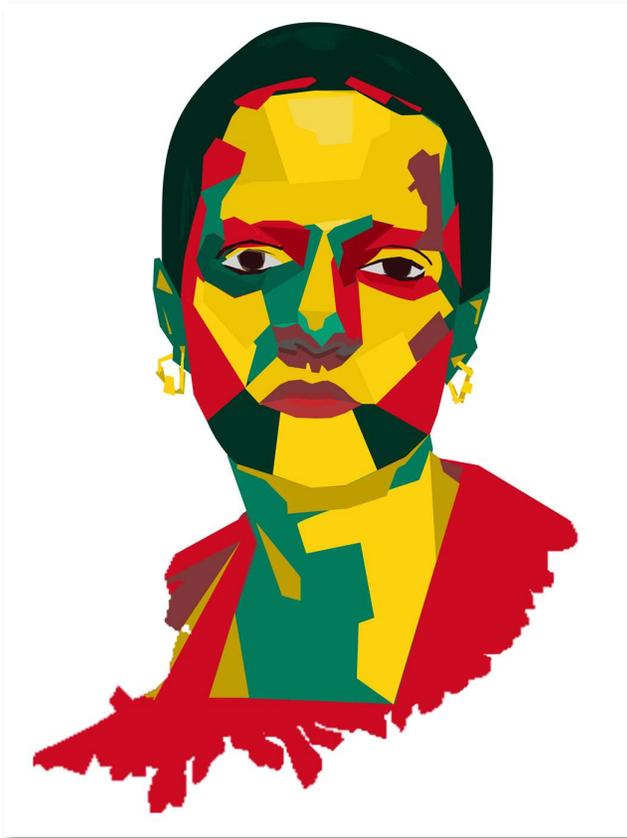
Women's role in Revolution

By the 1970s, women's leadership in revolutionary and nationalist movements was more visible in the English-speaking Caribbean (Stubbs 2011, 5). However, it is only recently that women's role in Caribbean history has received significant attention due to the rapidly expanding field of feminist historiography in the region: Nicole Phillip (2010) has produced scholarly work on the experiences of Grenadian women in the Revolution: Reddock's (1988) work on Elma Francois and Carol Boyce Davies' (2008) text on Claudia Jones are outstanding scholarly efforts appreciative of the role of Caribbean Leftist women in political activism. Additionally, related studies have grown in importance in light of current global trends that promote women's access to political power, gender quotas and gender-sensitive budgeting (Jaquette and Summerfield 2006, 12). Despite this, there has been tardiness in integrating gender and the experiences and understandings regarding women into Marxian class analysis concerning the region.

In revolutionary Grenada, women ascended unprecedentedly to leadership positions in new and reconstituted institutions. The NJM Women's Arm was formed in 1977 and subsequently a National Women's Organisation was established. The priority then accorded women was perhaps best illustrated in the transformation of the Grenada Women's Desk in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Social Affairs into an autonomous Ministry of Women's Affairs (1983). In the PRG between 1979 and 1982 there were four high profile women: a government minister (Jacqueline Creft), two deputy ministers (Phyllis Coard and Claudette Pitt) and the Ambassador to the Organisation American States, Dessima Williams. Hodge (2017) recalled that at the International Women's Day Rally of 1981:

There was a kind of 'aha' moment [when] all of the women in government leadership positions, for the first time, were shown to us on stage. Everyone was surprised at the number of women that came into the leadership.

It is against this historical backdrop that Jacqueline Creft, the revolutionary, iconic woman of the PRG, emerged.



Jacqueline: Jewel of the Revolution. Artwork by Isaiah McClean (2017); commissioned by the UWI Socialist Student Conference

'Jackie' Creft: Educator and Revolutionary

Jacqueline Creft was born into the middle-class family of Lyn and Allan Creft in St. Georges, Grenada, on 28 November 1946. She did well throughout her academic life. After secondary school, she moved seamlessly from secondary school teacher in Grenada to tertiary level student at Carleton University in Canada. On her return to Grenada, she was employed in educational institutions nationally and regionally and, under the PRG, became the Minister of Education of Grenada.

She acquired activist credentials at an early age. Growing up in the colonial era and during the Gairy regime, she developed a consciousness that would propel her to advocate consistently for social justice, speak out against inequalities and work towards redressing them. While at university in North America, her passion for social equality, politics, and radicalism was reinforced by the Black Power and civil rights movements. She was charismatic, popular, radical, brilliant and sharp in her political analysis and outlook (Grenade 2011, 96). Committed to helping the poor,

women's empowerment, youth development and education reform, she would serve these interests nationally and regionally.

Creft became one of the first female ministers in the PRG's Ministry of Education, Youth and Social Affairs. There, she dedicated herself to eradicating illiteracy, developing education system relevant to the people, building physical and institutional school infrastructure, and making education free at all levels, in light of the conviction that it was a right and not a privilege (Creft 1981, 52). Her leadership in the campaign against illiteracy in Grenada, through the Centre for Popular Education (CPE) set up to achieve this objective, had women as the most significant beneficiaries. Over its short period of existence, the institution accomplished the task of teaching reading and writing to 881 'illiterates' and 287 semi-literates, the majority of whom were women (Schoenhals and Melanson 1985, 49). Through the CPE, students (both male and female) acquired reading and writing skills, and were able to learn about Grenadian society and culture and assist in bridging inter-generational gaps existing in the communities.

Educators themselves benefitted through the National In-Service Teacher Education Programme (NISTEP) established in 1980 to train all of the nation's 500 unqualified teachers in every government primary and all-age junior secondary schools. The NISTEP organised a compulsory three-year in-service programme for teachers in three centres. Additionally, training programmes were initiated in every production sector to equip workers to better understand, appreciate and function in the jobs they were doing. Grenada's farmers, nurses, hospitality employees, teachers, fishermen, policemen and public servants benefitted from in-service training programmes, workers' education classes, and scholarships for further training abroad. No one was left behind in these community-based training programmes.

In spite of her intense engagement in education and national development, Creft is often remembered for her relationship with Maurice Bishop, at the expense of her political work and independent positions. Boyce Davies (2008, 53), in her powerful exposition on Claudia Jones' life and the black female subject, notes regarding the latter:

The personal dimension of black women's struggles is rarely talked about, except through gossip, consigned always to the personal and

private. I think it is important to demystify it here. My point is simply this: black women involved in political, activist, public work that locates them in leadership roles are generally not seen by the rest of society, including their partners, as acting out of positions of possible power for the community, as is assumed for men.

Regarding the Revolution, other female thinkers and activists have remarked on the different consequences of engagement for men and women given the fact that the unequal sexual division of labour remained unchallenged during the Revolution.

Hodge (2017) stated:

The whole time there was a pressure cooker atmosphere because of external interferences... [and] the threat of invasion was an everyday thing...the women's groups were planning what to do, where to hide children and so on. Within the NJM party...in that era, the men simply did not have the conditioning. The women in the party were complaining [about] a situation of overwork. People were doing too much, the demands of people's time, and the women started to signal that their children complained they were not seeing them.

Political and ideological positions within the party and government eventually led to internal and externally-influenced conflicts as the Revolution progressed. Creft had to negotiate her relationship with Bishop himself who was her partner and father of her son, Vladimir. Other dominant personalities were Phyllis and her husband, Bernard Coard, Bishop's leading critic. The power struggle among different strains in the NJM erupted into a violent national tragedy, in which Jacqueline Creft was assassinated at Fort Rupert on October 19, 1983. Maurice Bishop and other high-profile PRG members were also assassinated on that day and this paved the way for the invasion of Grenada by the armed forces of the United States of America.

Conclusion

Jacqueline Creft's story is not tangential but integral to that of the Grenada Revolution. Women held prominent roles in the New Jewel Movement and the PRG. As a government minister, she assisted in mobilising the country and excelled in her ministry. During the short life of the Revolution (1979-1983), women struggled to realise their revolutionary aspirations, which by 1983 had already led to their disengagement in some cases and ambivalence in others. Several factors contributed to this disconnect: contentious personal relationships, internecine strife in the party, the increasing militarisation of the state in response to perceived threats of an

imperial invasion and economic decline, along with the problem of structural unemployment. Historiography may have been reticent on her contribution, but Jacqueline Creft's legacy of youth and women's empowerment through education endures.

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