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Laurie R. Lambert

*University of California, Davis*, llambert@ucdavis.edu

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Memories and Temporalities of Revolution: A Review of Shalini Puri's *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present* and David Scott's *Omens of Adversity*

Laurie R. Lambert, University of California, Davis

Shalini Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 341 pp.

David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 219 pp.

In different ways, the most recent books by Shalini Puri and David Scott are obsessed with questions of time, memory, and revolution. While Puri's text explores the nature and content of memories produced around the Grenada Revolution, Scott is concerned with why certain memories are produced while other memories remain unthinkable or unrecoverable. The very different approaches taken by Puri and Scott reflect their divergent interests and indeed result in diverse analyses of Grenada's entanglement with revolution and its aftermaths. What unites these projects, however, is their shared interest in the implications of the Grenada Revolution for our contemporary moment. In the midst of a Caribbean plagued by the constraints of neoliberalism, failing economies, and deteriorating environments there are few issues—reparations for slavery and LGBTQ rights for example—around which productive conversations are taking shape in the public sphere. Caribbean governments appear increasingly paralyzed when facing their nations' problems. Recent scholarship in the field has found various ways of accounting for the region's current challenges drawing on shared themes of temporality, sovereignty (or non-sovereignty), and reparations.<sup>1</sup> These themes reflect a growing concern about our ability to imagine certain futures, and anxieties about how to comprehend a political present that

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<sup>1</sup> Yarimar Bonilla's *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (2015) takes up questions of temporality related to political radicalism and self-governance in the non-independent, French Caribbean. Analyzing the problems of freedom and postcolonial sovereignty, Bonilla asks whether the concept of a "non-sovereign future" can help us better understand Caribbean politics in a modern era, even as the political struggles of the region do not easily fit within the "normative categories" that have come to define postcolonial sovereignty (Bonilla 15). Deborah A. Thomas's work on violence and the ongoing project of state formation in Jamaica is equally invested in temporality and recursion, and what these concepts can teach us about sovereignty and reparations (or repair) in the contemporary Caribbean (Thomas 2011, 2015).

seems saturated with the struggles, traumas, and violence of the past.<sup>2</sup> It should be no surprise then, that in this moment Caribbeanist scholarship should choose to revisit the relatively recent history of the Grenada Revolution in order to discern what this history can teach us about both the present and the future. That both of these texts were released in 2014 suggests that the unfinished business of this revolution is critical to an understanding of current challenges. It seems Caribbean Studies is ready (yet again) to grapple anew with revolution (arguably the foundational term on which Caribbean identity has been forged), and with what *postcolonial* revolutionary formations in particular mean for our futures.

Puri's *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* is a study of memory in its different iterations. Throughout Puri both creates and examines an immense archive related to the Grenada Revolution and its enduring impact on the cultural geography of Grenada and the wider Caribbean. It is the broad scope of this archive that stands out as one of the central contributions of this book to Caribbean Studies. Puri's archive consists of interviews, calypso and reggae, speeches, newspapers, government documents, novels, poems, essays, folklore, visual art, and theatre. It is a temporal archive in many senses – dependent on the time and place in which her subjects are situated. Indeed the construction of this archive indexes the timeliness of Puri's fieldwork as a scholarly intervention in Grenada: many of the voices that emerge from the book speak as if they had been waiting a long time, and for the right interlocutor, to break their silence and unburden themselves of their memories. In documenting what she calls the “fragility of human archives” Puri traverses many disciplinary boundaries (218). She is at once literary and cultural critic, historian, geographer, ethnographer, and theorist. (Which is to say, this text is representative of what is most essential about Caribbean Studies as a field—its reach across multiple disciplines to describe a complex civilization).

Puri's book is both episodic and encyclopedic in its survey of cultural memory. She details the positive contributions of the revolution such as the implementation of participatory democracy, alongside its negative aspects, including the censorship and detention of journalists whose work critiqued the revolutionary government. The book's chapters, each with evocative titles such as “Wave,” “Fort,” and “Archipelago,” offer a way into the history of the revolution and its cultural production. Puri introduces readers to the Grenada Revolution, not as a narrative of capitalism versus communism, but more

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<sup>2</sup> I read Erica R. Edwards's *Charisma and the Fiction of Black Leadership* (2012) as another valuable part of this conversation. While Edwards's text focuses on African American culture and politics, her work includes a study of at least one Caribbean figure (Marcus Garvey), and her analysis of the emphasis on “gifted male charismatic leadership” in African American culture reflects a broader African Diasporic concern around radical politics and the pitfalls of the “charismatic scenario”.

accurately as a story of the “intra-Left” (7-8). There is not one “Caribbean Left” in this text, and instead Puri productively mines the archive to uncover the depth and breadth of the many strands of leftist thinking in the region at the tail end of the Black Power Movement. She reveals a time of creativity, malleability, and fracture among black radical and leftist thinkers and politicians during this period. Puri’s ability to analyze the multiplicity of leftist positions in relation to Grenada is part of the practice of reading the vernacular that permeates her work (15). This attention to the vernacular is also evident in her examination of the connections between politics, land, and art in Grenada. She writes, “As an emblem of the local and the particular, landscape and place in Grenadian arts offer a metaphor for a locally grounded politics” (15). Land and politics are bound together tightly throughout her analysis, and she successfully situates herself as a scholar with an ear to the ground, listening for the memories that have been submerged in the silences of Grenada’s difficult history.

Two of Puri’s key concepts, “stone memory” and “volcanic memory” are organized around metaphors of land and nature. She defines stone memory as “a choreographed and commemorative memory” (for example the renaming of the Point Salines airport for Maurice Bishop or the St. George’s Medical School memorial to the American soldiers killed in Grenada) (18, 135 ). Volcanic memory she defines as “a less spectacular, sometimes involuntary, unstable, and unauthorized memory” (evident in the telescoping of time in the paintings of Grenadian artist Canute Calliste, who links the fall of the revolution in October 1983 to the Carib’s Leap of 1650 or 1651) (18, 162). Puri reads memory as “a social process that is critical to the constitution, struggles and affiliations of community,” and also as “...the past put to work for the present in a particular space” (13). In the chapter “Stone” she writes about public memorials to the revolution. She takes these monuments and artifacts as cultural texts, bringing them into conversation with poetry, party minutes, and interviews she conducted with Grenadians. Puri uses this chapter to remind readers of both the significance and the shortcomings of stone memory; she pushes us to unpack the ideological baggage these monuments come with, and she challenges the “solidity of stone” by suggesting that public memory is something both tense and tenuous (150). She analyzes the process by which Grenada’s international airport was renamed in Bishop’s honor in 2009, noting that the renaming was not without controversy. “[O]ld fractures within the Left” resurfaced in the Grenadian public sphere, as the Grenadian government attempted the seemingly contradictory move of depoliticizing Bishop’s image in order to memorialize his political importance. Puri’s attention to the gender dynamics of public memorials leads her to a consideration of Jacqueline Creft, the PRG’s Minister of Education, and a figure who has taken up significantly less space in the public imagination than say Bishop or even Bernard Coard. Puri closes the chapter by including excerpts from

interviews with people who remember Creft's commitment to Grenadians and Caribbean artists, and her discomfort with the hierarchy embedded in the very government of which she was a part (148-150). At the end of the chapter Puri wonders at the tendency of stone memory to validate only masculine contributions to revolution. Where is the memorial to Creft and other women like her?

In her chapter on hurricanes and historiography Puri takes her cues from the literature of Grenadians Merle Collins and Paul Keens-Douglas; the work of these writers allows Puri to think through representational parallels between Grenadian political trauma and the trauma of natural disasters. Puri argues that Collins uses images and metaphors of hurricanes in order to represent Caribbean political history in a cyclical format, as opposed to a linear one. "A hurricane historiography is more attuned to repetition, disorder, unpredictability," Puri writes (212). Understanding that Grenadians have survived past political and ecological traumas provides yet another way to work through the trauma of the Grenada Revolution. According to Puri, this view is at the center of the discourse on "reconciliation and regeneration" that she reads in texts such as Collins's novel *Angel* and her essay "Tout Moun ka Pléwé," which narrates the history of Grenada as a history of hurricanes (213). This discussion of hurricanes leads Puri to an argument about the activation of different kinds of memory and archival production in the aftermath of trauma. Moments of trauma and violence are not only responsible for the destruction of certain sites of memory, she explains, but also for the triggering of memories of traumas passed. Puri uses the term "hurricane poetics" to describe the regenerative power she finds in Collins's writing (222). Here the Grenada Revolution, for all its tragedy, becomes but another storm that the nation has survived.

The chapter "Prison" focuses on narratives produced by members of the Grenada 17, those convicted in the murder trial for Bishop. Puri discusses Ewart Layne's *We Move Tonight: The Making of the Grenada Revolution* (2014), Callistus Bernard's *They Could Only Kill Me Once* (2006), and Phillis Coard's *US War on One Woman: My Conditions of Imprisonment in Grenada* (1988). She speculates as to why these texts contain apologies but not confessions, and she surmises that the absence of clear explanations of what happened on and around October 19<sup>th</sup> reflected the ongoing uncertainty of the legal situation of the Grenada 17 (233). Her analysis focuses on how readers might then receive these texts. Of the prison narratives Puri notes:

They are part of a legal and ideological battle over how to name and understand the events of October 19. The struggle these texts wage is to reposition the Grenada 17 from their legal status as criminals convicted of murder to that of political prisoners of the Cold War, hostages of the United States, or victims of historical accident or fate. (230)

While Scott argues that the Grenada 17 were not criminals in the legal sense and that they were in fact hostages of the Cold War, (a point that I will come to later in this review), Puri is more willing to assume their culpability (a sense shared by a large sector of Grenadians).

Ultimately Puri rejects the idea that memories of the revolution inevitably “culminate in a tragic vision” (222). Instead she is interested in what new modes of historiography can reflect the joys and traumas of the Grenada Revolution. This question of historiography is one I found most compelling in Puri’s work. Even as she describes her book as an “effort to gather an archive” she also states very clearly that the “book is not a history of the Grenada Revolution” (12-13). Reading this sentence I couldn’t help but think of a similar sentiment expressed by Scott in *Omens of Adversity* (21). What made me pause here is not that we should expect a history from Puri, a literary critic (or from the anthropologist Scott, for that matter), but rather that both of their texts are a testament to the problem the archives of the Grenada Revolution present for scholars seeking an historical understanding of the events. It is as if history in the conventional sense cannot be rendered from these archives, and that perhaps the Grenada Revolution requires an altogether different sense of history and temporality. These are some of the issues addressed in David Scott’s work.

In *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* Scott picks up where he left off in his previous book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004), a meditation on C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*. *Conscripts* examines the scenes of James’s writing of *Jacobins*, ruminating on the ramifications of James’s initial 1938 version of the history of the Haitian Revolution and then his 1963 revision of the text just as the Anglophone Caribbean was transitioning from colonial dependence to postcolonial independence. In *Omens* Scott continues to comb the theoretical strands that shape Caribbean revolution, asking what we can learn from the Grenada Revolution and its aftermaths. Time, memory, and justice are the most richly argued concepts here, as Scott situates the tragedies and legacies of the Grenada Revolution in an ever-shifting Caribbean present. His argument is that the Grenada Revolution represents a problem space that strains our capacity to grasp the value of the revolution in our current historical moment. Concepts such as memory and justice are necessarily compromised by the disjuncture between

what these terms meant during the revolutionary period and what they have come to mean now under the pressures and exigencies of neoliberalism.

Scott makes use of interviews and ethnography, and close readings of literary, historical, and political texts, and the questions and conclusions he brings to his study are deeply informed by a range of philosophers including Agamben, Arendt, Derrida, and Ricoeur. He uses the interventions of these thinkers to locate the temporalities that make and re-make tragedy and political trauma in Grenada. His analysis focuses on the multiple temporal modes necessary to comprehend the complexity of a revolution that held so much promise before it self-imploded, clearing the way for the US military invasion. The book is organized in four chapters, each dealing with an aspect of postcolonial temporality in the aftermath of Grenada. These chapters fall under two sections – “Tragedy, Time” and “Memory, Justice”. The first section figures time itself, and the passing of time as tragic (Scott 31). The first chapter, “Revolution’s Tragic Ends: Temporal Dimensions of Political Action” revisits the final weeks of the revolution in an attempt to identify which key elements came together to cement the tragic in Grenada. Here Scott relies on Brian Meeks’s (1993) account of the tensions brewing inside the Central Committee of the NJM in September and October 1983, internal party documents, and interviews with figures such as Coard and Collins. Scott argues that the Grenada Revolution produces a form of messianic time—time that encapsulates a sense of hopeful expectation. This hope was symbolized in the socialist-inspired turn to the left that the NJM brought to Grenada in 1979 when the revolution promised Grenadians a more meaningful independence. The PRG allowed Grenada to take its rightful place among a community of postcolonial nations within the Non-Aligned Movement. Beyond this the NJM ushered in an air of youthfulness to Grenadians politics. Looking back at the Grenada Revolution, then, one is forced to confront the “former futures” that the revolution promised (10). The end of the Grenada Revolution (and the disturbingly fateful way in which this tragedy seemed embedded in the timeline of the revolution) brings about an inability to imagine productive futures.

The foreclosure of futures promised and the end of the anticipation these futures generated creates another sense of time experienced in the present: Scott calls this “ruined time” (12). In the aftermath of the Grenada Revolution “ruined time” indexes a temporal catastrophe presaged by a pattern of repeated tragedy and trauma that extends from the colonial period into the postcolonial period. Most provocatively, Scott refers to this cycle of repeated tragedy, and our inability to recover from the foreclosure of messianic futures as “an aftermath without end” (21). In the second chapter Scott’s analysis of Collins’s *Angel* focuses on Collins’s need to “contend with the revolution’s end as a limiting *fact* of history, not merely as a creative literary device” (96, original emphasis). The forward trajectory of Collins’s bildungsroman aligns with the progressive agenda

of the revolution for much of the novel but both are forestalled. Collins's novel serves as a literary representation of the "ruined time" of the present when it is overtaken by the colonial past. Scott's reading of her second novel, *The Colour of Forgetting*, is concerned with how the past and present exist simultaneously, as with a palimpsest. This coexistence, a haunting of the present by the past generates another of several sensibilities of time that Scott uncovers in his work. For Scott the representation of revolution in *The Colour of Forgetting*, offers a way of navigating out of ruined time by engaging with "a sensibility of time that is at once recursive and cumulative rather than successive and teleological" (96). The novel's insight is in the way it stages what Scott calls "the repetition of catastrophic time" and the way it makes evident deep patterns of colonial oppression that continue to mar Caribbean life (88). The time that signals the end of possibility also becomes the occasion for reasserting that possibility because it is precisely the time when loss and the need to recover are most keenly felt. Scott is interested not only in the foreclosure of the revolution's early promise, but also in the way this foreclosure is experienced in the public sphere—how it produces certain impulses while suppressing others.

The second half of the book, "Memory, Justice", is about legacies. Chapter three, "Generations of Memory: The Work of Mourning" deals with the efforts of the Young Leaders, a group of Grenadian teenagers, who try to locate the lost remains of Bishop. The Young Leaders form the generation born around or after 1983. Scott argues that this generation is freer to ask questions about the revolution because they are not burdened by the shame of violence and transgressions of the revolution nor are they plagued by the need to blame each other, as is often the case with their parents' generation. For the older generation, the disappearance of the bodies of Bishop and others killed on the fort is a gaping wound in the collective consciousness of the nation. The emotional paralysis that besets the older generation is not present with these young people and Scott argues that they have a different relationship to the "temporal structure of revolutionary desire or (its sometime twin) revolutionary recrimination" (123). The temporal rupture between these two generations serves as a kind of opening, what Scott calls a condition of "postmemory," that grants the younger generation immunity from the sense that possible futures have been irrevocably aborted (126). Scott reads the mourning/memory work of the Young Leaders as an example of an ethical engagement with the past, an indication that "our moral obligations to the dead can be worked out, worked through, with fidelity, with agonistic respect, and with cautious hope" (126). His insistence on agonistic respect can be read as a reference to the hagiography that has surrounded Bishop in his death and the significant effort Scott makes in this book to both complicate the image of Bishop (and his place in the various frameworks of memory that

surround this revolution) and to ask whether the Grenada 17 have been treated unjustly in the revolution's aftermaths.

The final chapter, "Evading Truths: The Rhetoric of Transitional Justice" looks at the flawed, often legally dubious, process under which the Grenada 17 were tried, convicted, and sentenced for the murders of October 19<sup>th</sup>. In Scott's evaluation the unjust treatment of the Grenada 17 stems from the ideology of "transitional justice" imposed on nations such as Grenada as the Cold War was coming to an end. In this context transitional justice describes "idioms and strategies concerned not only with punishment, but also with establishing truth, repairing harms and damages, paying respect to victims, and above all, pursuing reconciliation" (131). In the post-Cold War triumph of liberalism, transitional justice is therefore aimed at defining the terms under which countries like Grenada are to transition to "democracy" after they have been delivered from the clutches of socialism. The transition offers nations the time and space to concede the "error" of their socialist experiments, to punish those who led the experiment, and to otherwise adopt a new ideological identity that is more palatable to Western liberal society. In Grenada the quest for transitional justice began in earnest in the days leading up to the 1983 US invasion when Caricom leaders, such as Dominica's Prime Minister Eugenia Charles, were called upon to denounce the revolution and publically affirm their belief that a military invasion of Grenada was the only viable solution to remedy the violent catastrophe that had befallen the nation. It is eventually under the rubric of transitional justice that several surviving members of the NJM and the People's Revolutionary Army were captured and tortured, then tried and convicted for the deaths of Bishop and others on the fort. Scott argues that transitional justice functions not only in the gross miscarriage of justice related to how the trial was conducted within the Grenadian court, but also with how public opinion of the Grenada 17 is deeply influenced by "the bloodlust of US imperial power" (150). This final chapter outlines the key points of the murder trial and its surrounding controversies, while making the case that the trial and its outcome become inevitable within an ideology of transitional justice. That is, transitional justice delegitimizes political formations such as the Grenada Revolution by presenting North Atlantic values of democracy and liberalism as universal values and as values superior to those of alternate ideological positions.<sup>3</sup> This is the most important argument the book makes—that under US imperialism the Caribbean has been conditioned, at least in the realm of public politics, to denounce and abhor radical aspects of its history. Scott is right; and the claim he makes here should change how we understand issues such as the memory of the Grenada Revolution in a Caribbean imaginary, as well as the apparent stagnancy in contemporary Caribbean politics. The

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the concept "North Atlantic universals" from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

trauma of the end of the Grenada Revolution coupled with the immense pressures of transitional justice leaves the Grenadian people vulnerable. Scott senses that in their vulnerability Grenadians turned their backs on the Grenada 17, and viewed the trial as a venue for punishment and revenge. Scott concludes that the Maurice Bishop murder trial “was a cynical act of pure vengeance carried out with the complicity of a people made vulnerable by the still fresh trauma of 19 October and the still indecipherable evolution of events that, consequently, seemed to suggest the work of political evil” (150). The idea of ruined time is then tied into this additional blow to the legacy of the revolution—the way in which the Grenadian public seems to renounce their own radical past. Scott’s critique understands the actions of the Grenadian public as part of the hegemony of neoliberalism and its refusal to recognize other forms of democracy—particularly those tied to Marxism (129). This is an immeasurably important critique that will have reverberations far beyond the boundaries of Caribbean Studies.

In the epilogue “The Temporality of Forgiving” Scott questions why Grenadian publics have ignored or refused to accept the apologies of the Grenada 17. He suggests that perhaps the Grenadian public owes the Grenada 17 an apology for the way that Grenadians treated them (and allowed them to be treated – without protest) during the course of the US invasion and their subsequent trial and incarceration. Here he pulls the final thread in his argument around temporality and revolution when he says that there was something “fateful” about the actions of the 17 (167). The destruction of the revolution and the criminalization of the surviving leadership are, therefore, part of the tragic fate set in motion in the early hours of March 13, 1979 when the revolution began. Another way of viewing it would be to concede that there was no way the US could have allowed the Grenada Revolution to continue. Scott closes the book noting that those killed on October 19<sup>th</sup> remain “*immune* to moral implication, protected against culpability in the plurality of clashing actions that ultimately conducted them to their doom” (169, emphasis original). The “criminal guilt” of the Grenada 17 remains to be proven in Scott’s view, while the role that Bishop and his allies played in the events leading to their deaths remains understudied, buried in the idolization of Bishop following his death. Puri takes issue with Scott on this point. She counters Scott’s argument on tragedy, insisting that “in Greek tragedy, tragic heroes are still held accountable for their actions, even if the events in which they participate are beyond their control” (236). As flawed as the legal process was, she writes, “that some members of the Grenada 17 physically eliminated Bishop along with key members of the revolutionary government has been proved beyond dispute and is readily admitted by the Grenada 17” (237). Puri’s intervention reminds us that Scott’s claims around what might be owed to the Grenada 17 are not without their problems. One is compelled to ask how Grenadians can be expected to forgive when they have not been offered any

uncontested confessions or any clear picture of what exactly transpired in the revolution's final days. Members of the Grenada 17 have taken *moral* responsibility, but not *criminal* responsibility for how the revolution ended. How are Grenadians to grapple with the distance between these two concepts? Is it fair to expect them to forgive and carry on without a clearer sense of what transpired?

In asking these questions I also want to complicate the idea that Grenadians have not offered, in their own way, a form of unconditional forgiveness. All members of the Grenada 17 have now been released from prison, and all except for Bernard and Phyllis Coard, have re-settled in Grenadian society. Some have remarried, many are part of church communities on the island, and all have begun the process of rebuilding their lives—this on an island with a population of 100,000. The fact that they have been able to reintegrate into society is testament to the capacity of Grenadians for reconciliation. While Scott is right to remind readers of the “evidence of torture and the length of incarceration” endured by the 17, until some key questions about events leading up to and including October 19<sup>th</sup> are answered, it is not clear on what grounds Grenadians, and Caribbean people more generally, can be expected to “recast our assumptions” about Grenada’s violent past, as he asks us to do in his epilogue (170-171). To be sure, Grenadians, including the 17, ought to seek some form of reparation for the trauma suffered during, and especially at the end of, the revolution. The question remains: reparation from whom? Scott and Puri offer readers very different approaches to the study of the Grenada Revolution. While Puri writes that her book is “a meditation on memory, on its frailty and its survival, on the unexpected sites and manner of its surfacing” (12-13), Scott leaves readers to consider how “tragic action relies on forgiving to preserve the possibility—the freedom—of new action” (171). Both texts attempt to lay certain ghosts to rest while reminding us of how the Grenada Revolution illuminates different kinds of futurity in Caribbean thought and action.

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