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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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Contents

List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	x
Acknowledgements	xi
Preface	xiv
1. Introduction	1
1.1 A Continuously Changing Islandscape	2
1.2 Aims and Objectives of This Study	4
1.3 An Island Rooted in an Aquapelago	7
1.4 Once Upon a Time on an Island: The “Natural” Environment.....	11
1.5 Scope and Structure of the Thesis	16
2. Current State of Research and Historical Context	18
2.1 Current State of Historical (and Archaeological) Research.....	19
2.2 Introduction to Grenada’s Settlement History Since 1498	25
2.2.1 The Kali’nago and Kali’na of Camáhogne	26
2.2.2 European Invasion and the Establishment of Plantation Slavery Under the French.....	33
2.2.3 Expansion of Sugar and Slavery Under the British	41
2.2.4 The Post-Emancipation Settlement Landscape and the Rise of a Peasantry ...	52
2.2.5 The Changing Socio-Economic Landscape and the Remaking of Society.....	59
2.2.6 Attempts to Remake the Political and Social Landscape from Below	63
2.2.7 Small Island Developing State (SIDS) in a Global Landscape	69
3. Conceptualizing Landscape in Creolizing Caribbean Islandsapes	73
3.1 “An Island is a World”.....	75
3.2 Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Caribbean Societies.....	79
3.3 Defining Landscape: From <i>Landschap</i> to Humanist Geography	82
3.4 The Life Story of Islandsapes	86
3.5 Creolization and Contestation of Caribbean Islandsapes.....	88
3.6 Defining the Landscape of Identity Creation in Caribbean Islandsapes	92
4. Analyzing Landscape Transformations in Grenada via the Lens of HGIS: A Methodological Approach	101
4.1 HGIS: A Spatial Approach to Analyzing Land Use/Landscape Change.....	102
4.2 Data Sources	104
4.3 Digital Mapping and Data Processing	108
5. Landscape Transformations in a Small Caribbean Islandscape, 1498-2022	113
5.1 Mapping the Kali’nago and Kali’na of Camáhogne (1498-1649).....	114
5.2 Mapping the Establishment of Plantation Slavery Under the French (1649-1762)	126

5.3	Mapping the Expansion of Sugar and Slavery Under the British (1762-1838)	143
	Mapping the Post-Emancipation Settlement Landscape and the Rise of a Peasantry (1838-1900).....	155
5.4	Mapping the Socio-Cultural Landscape and the Remaking of Grenadian Society (1900-1950)	163
5.5	Mapping the Remaking of the Political and Social Landscape from the Bottom Up (1951-1983)	169
5.6	Mapping a Caribbean SIDS in a Global Landscape (post-1983).....	178
6.	Locating the Representations and <i>Memory-Traces</i> of the Authors of the Grenada Islandscape	188
6.1	“Carib Stones,” Cracked Pots and Postholes: Unearthing Kali’nago Beyond Caribs’ Leap	190
6.2	Plantations, Priests and Place Names: Situating the French at the Rupture of the Modern Grenadian Landscape	203
6.3	Anansi Stories, Nation Dance and Saraka: Uncovering the Representation and <i>Memory-Traces</i> of Western Africa in the Grenadian Landscape.....	214
6.4	King’s Honours, English, Cricket and a Spot of Tea: Reckoning with the Overwhelming Presence of Britishness in the Grenadian Landscape.....	232
6.5	Continuing Cultural Influences on the Grenadian Landscape	241
7.	From Kali’nago to Creole: (Re)Creating and Contesting the Creolized Grenada Islandscape	247
7.1	Cooking Up the One-Pot Creolized Grenadian Landscape	250
7.2	Contesting Roots and Origins Along the Journeys of the Ancestors.....	265
8.	Place Identities in the Grenada Islandscape	270
8.1	“We Navel-String Bury Here”: Affirming Identities in the Grenada Islandscape	272
8.2	Palimpsest Landscape: Connecting Stories Across Place and Time	276
9.	Epilogue	297
	References	301
	Abstract	364
	Curriculum Vitae	366

List of Figures

Figure A: James Casey’s “A plan of the town of St. George in the island of Grenada,” 1778, with Ravine Jardín insetxv

Figure 1.1 Map of the Caribbean & northern South America, with Grenada inset7

Figure 1.2 3-D Map of Grenada, showing its mountainous relief, c201912

Figure 1.3 Schematic elevation of Grenada, showing its biological plant and animal distribution (based on Beard 1946) 14

Figure 2.1 Map of Grenada showing Indigenous heritage sites, 2021.....23

Figure 2.2 Map of the modern circum-Caribbean region with presumed major precolonial migrations into the archipelago.....26

Figure 2.3 Spanish ships (A) approaching Kali’nago canoes (B) along Grenada’s northern coast, c161430

Figure 2.4 Historical map of the southern Caribbean and northern South America, c170732

Figure 2.5 “Carte de la rade et du port du Fort Royal...,” 1746 by Romain34

Figure 2.6 L’Isle de la Grenade (redrawn from Blondel, 1667)37

Figure 2.7 “Carte de l’Isle de la Grenade,” 1763.....44

Figure 2.8 Plan of Bacolet or Hope Estate, St. Andrew, 1875, showing an area along its northern boundary (left) sold to peasant farmers, illustrating how villages developed on the periphery of estates, subsequently taking on the names of the estates and eventually enveloping them.....56

Figure 3.1 Development of landscape research84

Figure 3.2: Identity chart showing the major influences on personal identity.....95

Figure 4.1 Different scales and actors involved in landscape change110

Figure 4.2 Schematic of the methodology sequence of input data and construction of HGIS maps (adopted from Etter et al. 2008).....112

Figure 5.1: HGIS model locating Kali’nago and Kali’na settlements in Grenada, 1649-67.....117

Figure 5.2: Reconstructed Kali’nago village at Argyle, St. Vincent, showing a large *tábouï* surrounded by several round houses, 2015.....122

Figure 5.3A: European wares encountered with Cayo materials at the sites of Argyle, St. Vincent and La Poterie, St. Andrew.....	125
Figure 5.3B: Bone artifacts from Kalinago archaeological assemblages from Grenada, sites of La Poterie and Telescope Point, St. Andrew	125
Figure 5.4: Conference Bay, with La Poterie archaeological site in the foreground, remains of the Conference coconut plantation and Pearls in the distance, 2017	125
Figure 5.5A “Plan de l’avenue et du port de la Grenade,” 1670	129
Figure 5.5B “Carte de l’isle de la Grenade,” 1749[1743] by Romain.....	130
Figure 5.6: HGIS model locating all plantations by size and crop types within parish boundaries and 1 km increments in from the coast, 1763.....	134
Figure 5.7: HGIS model locating sugar plantations by size and number of enslaved within parish boundaries and 1 km increments in from the coast, 1763.....	136
Figure 5.8: HGIS model locating non-sugar plantations by size, crop types & number of enslaved within parish boundaries & 1 km increments in from the coast, 1763.....	138
Figure 5.9: HGIS model locating plantations by size & number of enslaved, 1763	140
Figure 5.9A: HGIS model locating French-era build roads, ports, anchorages and towns, 1763	141
Figure 5.9B: “A plan of George Town in the island of Grenada, surveyed by the direction of the commissioners for the sale and disposal of His Majesty’s lands in the year 1765” by François d’Imbert	142
Figure 5.10: Plantation ownership by nationality, 1766.....	145
Figure 5.11: Plantation ownership by nationality, 1772	145
Figure 5.12: Plantations by type of crops grown, 1772	145
Figure 5.13: HGIS model locating plantations by size and crop types within 1 km increments in from the coast, 1801/1824.....	149
Figure 5.14: HGIS model locating sugar plantations by size and number of enslaved within 1 km increments in from the coast, 1801/1824.....	151
Figure 5.15: HGIS model locating plantations by size and number of enslaved within 1 km increments from the coast, 1801/24.....	153
Figure 5.16: HGIS model locating British-era ports, anchorages and towns, within parish boundaries, 1801	154
Figure 5.17: HGIS model locating plantations by crop types, 1897.....	159

Figure 5.18: HGIS model locating infrastructural changes between 1801 and 1900	162
Figure 5.19: Map showing distribution of plantations by size, 1940.....	165
Figure 5.20: Map showing Land Settlement Schemes, 1909-1939	165
Figure 5.21: Land acquisitions under Land for the Landless Scheme, 1968-79.....	173
Figure 5.22: Map showing Grenada Farms Corporation under the PRG, 1983	173
Figure 5.23: Map showing distribution of plantations over 100 acres, 1988	180
Figure 5.24: Land cover/forest formation map of Grenada, 2001	183
Figure 5.25: Satellite images of the Grand Anse area in 1951 and 2010, showing the extensive landscape changes in the intervening 59 years, particularly in the urbanization of the area due primarily to tourism development	185
Figure 5.26: Land cover (BSG) map of Grenada, 2015.....	187
Figure 6.1: Indigenous-derived words in Grenada’s English Creole as a word cloud	193
Figure 6.2: “Wild Indian” masqueraders at annual Carnival celebrations.....	198
Figure 6.3: 17/18 th -century-built Fort George commandeering the town of St. George’s today as it did when it was built as Fort Royal by the French after 1668	204
Figure 6.4A: French-era derived toponyms in Grenada today, including several Indigenous names.....	208
Figure 6.4B: Djab-Djab masqueraders on Jouvay morning, Carnival, 2018.....	211
Figure 6.5: African-derived words in Grenada’s English Creole as a word cloud	218
Figure 6.6: “Edna Jeremiah (with shack-shack/boli), drummers, and unidentified dancer at Shango ceremony in Levera, St. Patrick,” 1962.....	226
Figure 6.7: Map of British-era derived toponyms across Grenada today	238
Figure 7.1: Procession of the Maces into the new Houses of Parliament, with various officials wearing white wigs, since discontinued, 2018.....	262
Figure 8.1: Georeferenced images(from Gavin Smith’s 1801 map and 1985 DOS map of Grenada) of Duquesne village and surrounding areas	278
Figure 8.2: Model of a Kali’nago village at Argyle, St. Vincent, with <i>tábovi</i> and round houses by Eric Pelissier at the National Public Library, 2016.....	280
Figure 8.3: Prime Minister Mitchell and other officials and heritage advocates at the dedication of the Duquesne Petroglyphs in 2003.....	281

Figure 8.4: Possible ruins of the canal for the Duquesne estate along the banks of the Duquesne River, Duquesne, St. Patrick built with enslaved labor, c18th century.....285

Figure 8.5: The coastal village of Waltham, St. Mark.....288

Figure 8.6: Idealized representation of Paraclete estate, St. Andrew believed capturing Ninian Penelope Home in the carriage by Adam Callender, 1789291

Figure 8.7: 18th century ruins of the canal or aqueduct, built by enslaved labor, that brought water across the estate and to power the waterwheel at Waltham Estate, St. Mark.....292

Figure 8.8: Lists of the enslaved on the sugar and coffee plantations bought by Ninian Home in 1764 to create Waltham293

Figure 8.9: “A plan of the estate called Waltham situated in the parish of St. Mark belonging to Ninian Home, Esq.” by Daniel Phillips, 1772. The “Negro Huts”/slave village, and “Negro Ground”/provision grounds are highlighted294

List of Tables

Table 4.1: List of types of data and sources used to generate HGIS models.....	105
Table 4.2: List of historical periods and driving forces identified for Grenada	111
Table 5.1: Kali'nago and Kali'na sites/settlements and their prominent features, 1649-67.....	118
Table 5.2: Population of Grenada, 1669 to 1763, by race (percentage) and annual rate of change.....	131
Table 5.3: Number of Indigo and sugar plantations in Grenada, 1678-1763	131
Table 5.4: Number and types of animals on plantations in in Grenada, 1669-1761.....	133
Table 5.5 Land Settlement Schemes in Grenada, 1909-1939.....	167

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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

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 18th-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*¹ 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.² I can only speculate as to how the Kali’nago

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

² 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.³

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

³ 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*⁴ 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!*⁵



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

⁴ *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).

⁵ 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!