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## 'Reluctant Witnessing': Accounting for Violence in Transnational Jamaica

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Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 298 pp.

This timely and important monograph by anthropologist Deborah Thomas asks us to think about violence as an organizing principle of state formation, integral to the constitution of embodied subjectivity and to the reconfiguration of citizenship practices in today's neoliberal Caribbean. Thomas 'embeds' her arguments in transnational Jamaica in order to explore violence's operative modalities across a range of spaces, practices, events and texts: retributive violence decimating communities; the spectacularity of punitive imperial(ist) regimes; welfarist colonial discourses and post-colonial cultural policies; transnational circuits of popular culture; diasporic engagements with Jamaican-ness; Rastafari commemorative practices and calls for reparation.

The book describes itself as a reluctant witness to violence; in the opening paragraphs we learn of Thomas' own desire to stay clear of a topic that in so many ways is fast becoming a gatekeeping concept through which the Caribbean is mis/apprehended and mis/recognised. As the opening line says, "I have tried *not* to write about violence." (p. 1). That the monograph has ended up being precisely about this subject underscores both violence's ubiquity and its highly uneven distribution, and consequently the urgent need for thoughtful interventions instead of reductive and knee jerk responses, as in a January 31<sup>st</sup> 2008 *Economist* Article tellingly titled 'Sun, sea and murder,' which described the Caribbean as the 'world leader in violent crime' and Jamaica as 'the world's most murderous country.' The problem here is with how such lazy characterizations of the region's homicide statistics obfuscate more than they reveal.

*Exceptional Violence's* most critical contribution is its categorical rejection of these and other culturalist or shallowly historical 'explanations', the lurking sense, even when not explicitly articulated, that violence is endemic to the region and its peoples. In the place of such epistemological violence, most fully dissected in Chapter Two, the book proposes a reparations framework, which turns our attention to historical and structural lineages of terror and refuses a sanctioned forgetting of the foundational brutality of the New World encounter. Thomas is not interested in making a claim for a deterministic or direct straight line between past and present,

but rather in a more complex and layered exploration of the “legacies of colonial state formation and plantation-based extraction and...postcolonial state formation in Jamaica” (p. 13), in the repertoires of disciplinary and biopolitical power made available for deployment today. Thus for example Chapter One begins with a return to Jack’s Hill, the community that informed *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica*, Thomas’ first book, and where debilitating effects of gang related violence (so familiar to the garrison communities of urban Jamaica) erupted since fieldwork was originally conducted. In contemplating patterns of authority and patronage in Jack’s Hill, of a failed attempt to establish a frontier zone or even a state within a state, and of exceptional instances of violence, we are asked to bring “a longer history than that which is usually told” (p. 18) to bear on the present, one that brings into view the ways in which European conquest in the frontier zone of the Americas were built upon the inextricable relationship between violent/spectacular death and state formation.

There are several related registers at which the ‘exceptional’ of the title operates across the monograph, and through which a reparations framework is mobilized. Admittedly I am taking some degree of creative license with the OED here, in order to reframe exceptional as exceeding the expected, refusing containment. The first is that methodologically, one senses a sincere effort to pursue the interdisciplinary path that Michel-Rolph Trouillot (n.d.) persuasively urges us to consider: “Intellectuals who cross lines do so at their own risk. Fortunately, somewhere beyond the boundaries, fellow travelers appear, ready to share the perilous pleasures of exploration. For the time, however short, that their paths intersect with ours, the conversation is worth the risk.” The anthropologist trains her ethnographic gaze on a field that encompasses Jamaica and the transnational spaces to which the island is connected. The text moves across a community, archives, a bestselling Jamaican novel, reggae lyrics, the cultural policy of the Jamaican state, media blogs and public performances. This is not the eschewing of disciplinarity but rather an argument for anthropology’s enrichment (as well as its necessity in carefully tracking circuits of violence across and beyond Jamaica) through conversation with historical method, with what performance studies might offer as a repertoire of techniques and memory, and with literary and cultural studies and the force of representational regimes.

*Exceptional Violence* refuses not only the territorialization of disciplinarity but also methodological nationalism. The emphasis throughout is on how the local is produced, not in isolation from a wider context, but rather through the constellation of transnational circuits that

leave a unique imprint on specific places. This approach takes us beyond approaches that by singularly locating violence as endemic to the Jamaican body politic, fail to account for the wider relationships that are necessarily a part of the story. It also avoids the false trap of defensive responses to such pathologization that would displace the problems facing Jamaica and the Caribbean to an elsewhere. Chapter Three makes the point that state and popular efforts to blame Americanization and the media in particular for the corruption of young people and the glamorization of violence, elide the sanctioned and extreme brutality that was the hallmark of British imperialism. Returning to the question of enduring legacies that is central to the book's reparations framework, we are asked to consider how these earlier disciplinary regimes, with their systems of mutilation and dismemberment like the instruments designed for the punishment and torture of enslaved people at Greenwood Great House, remain available for mobilization in new ways in Jamaica. Is such spectacular violence really past, and how might it haunt the 'casual brutality' (the term is Neil Bissoondath's, 1988) that is part of the contemporary everyday?

The focus in the text is always on putting back into the picture the bodies displaced by violence and by talk of violence, evidenced most clearly perhaps in the title of each chapter. Dead Bodies. Deviant Bodies. Spectacular Bodies. Public Bodies. Resurrected Bodies. Repaired Bodies. Geopolitics is rescaled to foreground the corporeal, both as a way of making visible the everyday, lived costs of violence, as well as to track the racial, sexual, class contours of embodied subjectivities and their embeddedness in wider processes. In this sense, Thomas refuses to domesticate or bracket feminist preoccupations with the body, drawing on transnational feminist critiques of the postcolonial Caribbean state developed by M. Jacqui Alexander and others. We see, for example, that discourses about promiscuous single mothers, absent fathers, sexual others are not incidental but central to Caribbean state projects of policing borders, reproducing the right kinds of citizens, and participating in the international family of nations as a supposedly 'sovereign' state. But we are also urged to carefully attend to those everyday practices, spectacularly ordinary, of breathing, living, loving bodies, that might offer a glimpse of how lives are lived differently, not so jealously territorialized. At the same time, the book resists romancing the popular. Such an approach is evident in Thomas' examination of how Rastafarian communities, attempting to link cultural heritage to a sustainable program of economic empowerment, must strategically navigate a neoliberal context in which the state is itself seeking to globally capitalize on 'Brand Jamaica.' It is also at play in the book's discussion

of the transnational circuits that underpin *Yardie*, an immensely popular trilogy of gangster novels, in which racial respect is accompanied by its own gendered scripts of sexual respectability, thus responding both to the fundamental exclusions of creole nationalism while relying on heteronormativity and the disciplining of Black Jamaican working-class women's bodies.

Questions of accountability are central to a reparations framework that insists on probing deeply structural rather than shallowly cultural "lineages and inheritances" (p. 6), a cue that the book takes from popular forms like the lyrics of roots reggae music of the 1970s, discussed towards the end of Chapter Three (In this sense, and true to this tradition, Jamaican reggae artist Buju Banton warns that "the full has never been told"). Issues of answerability and justice are most explicitly attended to in the final chapter, *Resurrected Bodies*, that looks at how Rastafari remember the Coral Gardens events during which overt state violence against the community was unleashed in 1963 (Deborah Thomas, John Jackson Jr. Junior "Gabu" Wedderburn have also produced a documentary, *Bad Friday* – <http://www.badfridaythemovie.com> - with its own transnational itineraries in Jamaica and across the diaspora). These commemorative performances are not nostalgic (or for that matter simply tragic) enactments of memory. Repeated annually, they might best be seen as future-oriented interventions that stage 'histories of the present.' This, for Thomas, is what makes them 'counter-nationalist,' a stubborn emphasis on staging a conversation with the past to disrupt the exclusionary and violent articulations of citizenship that index the inauguration of the independent Jamaican state. Reparations here is about imagining new forms of community, whether through practices of remembering that attend to archives excised from state imaginaries, annual performances that produce modes of collectivity and solidarity within and beyond Jamaica, or the emergence of a framework that foregrounds the importance of access to, and collective ownership of land. Healing and justice go hand in hand.

Finally, *Exceptional Violence* refuses a space of innocence for scholarly inquiry by inviting us to reflect on its (our) own troubling role in the circulation of narratives of violence. This point is perhaps most clearly established in Chapter Two, where Thomas tracks the itineraries of a discourse of deviant Black bodies across a variety of institutional sites that include the academy, from the culture of poverty thesis of the early and mid-twentieth century that pathologized Black family forms to contemporary culture of violence explanations that

attach themselves to and travel with Jamaica, and Jamaican men in particular. This book, then, is also a cautionary tale about complicities and the academic project, about how we might possibly be implicated in the debilitating and deadly effects of epistemological and representational violence, and therefore about the ethical imperatives shaping our engagement. Published on the eve of Jamaica's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, this *Exceptional*, richly layered and urgent monograph bears reluctant witness to the difficult legacies of trauma and violence in the Caribbean, joining difficult conversations but never at the expense of losing sight of how we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within them.

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