

Review of *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* by Deborah A. Thomas, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011

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Deborah A. Thomas's book, *Exceptional Violence*, is an ambitious and forward thinking treatise on understanding the origins and causation of domestic and transnational violence in Jamaican society. Though Thomas is a professor in the field of anthropology, she employs a multidisciplinary approach to defining violence not as cultural characteristics inherently passed from one generation to the next, but rather as an effect of the hegemonically imposed stratified classism which grew out of the plantocracy system of colonialism. Thomas also explores postcolonial definitions of family structure, gender roles and economic racism.

It is through Thomas's multifaceted approach in trying to understand Jamaican society that brings her to the make the case for the concept of reparations as a solution for the myriad of afflictions which plague Jamaica. Jamaica and other post colonial nations struggle to find national identity, while still bearing much of the social structure derived from the plantation slave system.

The overarching theme of the book examines the idea of reparation, not just as “quantification of redress for past wrongs” but as “a framework for thinking about contemporary problems” (6). Thomas seeks to find new definitions for “culture” and “citizenship” in the Neoliberal age and implies a transnational age of identity. Thomas is convincing in her assessment that a true Jamaican national identity cannot be found in either a capitalist or socialist democracy, but rather, needs to be sought in an liminal zone that interprets Jamaica's past history and creates its future without the inherently racist paradigms.

Here, Thomas highlights Jamaica's Rastafarian movement as being “at the cutting edge of reorganizing our notions of political and cultural citizenship for today's world' (21).

The early Rastafarian movement in Jamaica is important to note because it was alternative social understanding that was indigenous to Jamaica. This understanding was not completely rooted in European social constructs, but rather was an Afro-centric movement that refused to participate in any Western (“Babylon”) systems.

In Chapter one of *Exceptional Violence*, Thomas examines how the political partisanship that singularly defines the social landscape in Jamaica is rooted in a “structural vulnerability” that was engrained in the mentality of slaves that remained loyal to specific plantations after their emancipation. Here, they were granted “provision grounds” where they

could conduct subsistence farming.

Thomas extrapolates this sense of connectedness and identity to the modern formation of “garrison” communities; which are neighborhoods that are filled with fiercely loyal constituents of the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP) or the Peoples National Party (PNP). Thomas does point out that during the late 1970's and into the 1980's, the violence surrounding these garrisons became less associated with politics and became more organized crime related. In discussing this violence, Thomas argues that this indicates that the violence perpetuated is not cultural, but rather is created by the structural systems of a society that has its historical origins stemming back to the transatlantic slave trade. Thomas further suggests that the continued presence of violence in Jamaican society is perpetuated by the political economy of neoliberalism, or a new form of the old colonial hegemony, where identity and security of the individual are further compromised.

Chapter two examines how slavery affected identity, family formation, and also deconstructs how the hegemonic idea of the patriarchal nuclear family perpetuates racism when studying the history of the African diaspora both during and after slavery. Thomas uses Oscar Lewis seminal idea of “the culture of poverty” to make a parallel point to the reference of Jamaica being a “culture of violence” in that she points out the inherent racism found in both oversimplifications. Thomas again seeks to use her framework of reparations to redefine how “black populations stand in relations to states.” This is one of several examples of how this book presents solutions to the problems of violence in Jamaican society and sets an optimistic tone for the future.

In Chapter three, Thomas deflates the common theory that American cinema, particularly the Gangster and Western Film genres, are central forces in eliciting violence in the Jamaican society. Instead, Thomas draws a direct correlation to the “spectacular forms of punishment and discipline” perpetrated by the slave-owning population as the modern reality of extreme violence being a normal day-to-day occurrence in Jamaica. The author does recognize some degree of diffusion in drawing on the work of political scientist, Obika Gray, who reinforces the accepted idea that American cultural exports such as movies, radio broadcasts and printed materials are a form of “ideological socialization” (Thomas, p.95) that perpetuates the idea of both the universality and supremacy of American culture.

Chapter four deals with images and representations of Jamaicans from within the society. A large portion of the chapter discusses the public reaction and ensuing debates focused around a statue depicting a naked male and female slave entitled, “Redemption Song”. The author uses letters to the editor and transcripts of radio shows to convey the deep insecurities of identity felt by a diverse and divided society. The conclusions she draws focus largely on the classism or caste system in Jamaica based on skin color.

In her final chapter, Thomas recounts a violent episode that occurred in 1963 between a small group of Rastafarians who were practicing subsistence farming on a plot of land owned by an upper class lighter skinned Jamaican, which harkens back to both the modern

realities of “provision grounds” and Jamaica's deeply entrenched caste system. Thomas uses this incident to illustrate the fear that middle and upper class Jamaicans have of the lower class and disenfranchised members of society erupting into violent revolution. It is easy to see that Thomas is indicating that structures from plantation era are still active agents in shaping the modern state of Jamaica.

In conclusion, this is postmodernist socio-cultural history in that Thomas touches on many different disciplines in her arguments beyond just a narrative history. Because of its expansive range of ideas, it is definitely best suited for graduate level studies in conjunction with a robust understanding of Jamaican history. The book contains strong historical data beyond the fieldwork compiled by Thomas alone. Perhaps her lack of substantial data and statistical evidence will be one area of the book readers will find remiss. Above all, Thomas's concept of reparations is exciting and innovative within the field of Caribbean Studies and the African Diaspora.