

Deborah A. Thomas. *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. xiii + 298 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5068-2; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5086-6

In a country where combative and opposing discourses surrounding notions of race, the institution of racism, (non-)citizenship, multiculturalism, and political warfare make up the main fodder of contemporary cultural literacy, one is never too shocked at the reports and rumors of violence, for we live in volatile societies charged by much friction. And the spectacular display of persons who are presented as markers of purported social change seem to predicate their actions on dogmatic ideologies, which in their time have already created violence. *Violence* is also an apt term to describe the hurtling of (mis)information that is transmitted from even the most trustworthy of media houses. One is no longer sure of what to believe. Now more than ever, one is reminded to *take everything with a grain of salt*.

It is against this background — where there is a need for onto-verifiable objectivity, and innovative, elucidating, and purposeful subjectivity — that we receive Deborah Thomas's work, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*. Though the territory may be unexpected, given the purposely ambiguous opening of this review, Thomas, while not intending to subject both territories (the United States, and Jamaica) to identical analytical operations, very early on makes us aware of her intent to rethink traditional approaches to considering Jamaica. Among her concepts to reconsider, she includes *imperialism*, *postcolonial state*, *violence*, *neoliberalism*, and *culture*. It is the term *translational*, though, that allows her to release Jamaica from its geographical boundaries and redefine the territory as a moving entity made up of dispersed peoples. The notion of a moving body is therefore not aleatory. Thomas also has a background in dance, and her work here is an impressive performance of knowledge gained through research and long deliberations on notions that are also at the core of her own self, a citizen of transnational Jamaica. Of particular brilliance is her repurposing of the concept of reparations as a “framework of thinking,” and her showing of violence as a result of class formation rather than as a result of inherent nature or cultural circumstance.

Admitting from the very onset that her aim was to work on social transformation through movement, Thomas could not *unbear* the beating pulse of violence that, indeed, rhythmized her movements and that of Jamaicans around her. The book, then, centers on particular representations of violence that Thomas uses to present complex notions: 1) violence as essential to how citizenship is conceived, rehearsed and executed; 2) violence as a framework in which to revisit and reconceptualize the state of postcolonial Jamaica; 3) violence as crucial to understanding the evolving understanding of Caribbean citizenship, especially in postcolonial Jamaica, in the face of popular neoliberal ideals; and 4) violence as a smoke screen to understand notions of justice, nationalism, pride, and hope among Jamaican peoples. After presenting the vast field of work that pertains to the study of violence, from which she presents hers as “exceptional,” Thomas presents her five chapters, using the term *bodies*, not as convenient connective tissue, but to indicate her interest in and attention to how social change takes on a body that will twist itself to adapt to the varying (violent) social processes that make it move.

Starting with “Dead Bodies, 2004-2005,” Thomas visits the current (contemporary) phenomenon of gang warfare in various mostly-urban parts of Jamaica, a violence that directly affects movement within a radius of its existence. Refusing to blindly repeat the existent discourse pertaining to political corruption and poverty, Thomas frames gang violence in the background of a country that never learned how to govern itself. Here, the still-lasting effects of slavery and colonialization are reechoed and used to show a country that attempts at progress by using misappropriated cultural practices as guidelines. Next, in “Deviant Bodies, 2005/1956,” Thomas

visits notions pertaining to Jamaica having a “culture of violence,” dialoguing this with discourse pertaining the “culture of poverty” in order to recast transnational Jamaica in the lens of neoliberalism. Thomas’s third chapter, “Spectacular Bodies, 1816/2007,” similar to her first one, seeks to treat the display of violence not as a mimicking brought on by the influence of popular culture in the United States, but perhaps as having its roots in the spectacle of violence that existed during time of slavery. “Public Bodies, 1963/2007” problematizes reception of icons of Jamaican culture, in order to speak about citizenship and its relationship to several indexes: sexuality, gender, education, and religion. The calling to remembrance (through words and by dialogue) a violence that took place in 1963, in the hands of members of the specific Rastafarian community, becomes a tool by which notions of community, integration, unity, and hope can be better articulated.

As a person interested in movement and dance myself, I appreciated the repeated use of terminology pertaining to performance that were used with much intellect and art within the work. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of violence and bodies begs for a genre that is robust enough to hold it; dance is far more than a clever-convenient choice. By way of gentle criticism, still relating more to content rather than style, I found that, while the work was very well presented, the sheer volume and depth of Thomas’s multiple, critical inquiries, at times, resulted in a very dense work. I wondered, for example, if each chapter couldn’t stand as its own independent book. Her inclusion of anecdotes, taken from personal experiences, therefore serves not only as provocative inciters for her chapters, but also as a welcome change to diversify the thick texture of the academic writing. Additionally, though, it was difficult to understand the references being made, as Thomas moved between the Jamaican state, transnational Jamaica, the Caribbean region, Europe, West Africa, and the United States.

I recommend this book to all persons from varied and interlocking disciplines of critical theory, critical race theory, politics, economics, history, and philosophy. While far from being an “easy read,” persons conversant with jargon pertaining to the listed fields will benefit greatly from the book. Additionally, any person keen on making informed and constructive contributions to discussions about issues that shape within the United States should visit Thomas’s work and learn from her. Finally, as a person who could define herself as belonging to at least two separate territories, Thomas reminds us that there is benefit to movement, dancing between the familiar and unknown, the believed-to-be-known and the researched, zones of inclusion and perceived exclusion in order to provide help and to repair ourselves.

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