

## Book Review

– *Political life in the wake of the plantation: sovereignty, witnessing, repair*, by Deborah A. Thomas. Duke University Press, 2019

On May 24, 2010, members of the armed forces and the police entered the garrison community of Tivoli Gardens in West Kingston to apprehend Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke on an extradition warrant. The military-police incursion left “at least seventy-five civilians officially recognized as having been killed” (p. xi). These events – known as the Tivoli Incursion – provide the “impulse for” this monograph in which Thomas attempts “to witness and to archive state violence, and to give some sense of how the practices and performances of state sovereignty – and the attempts to create life alongside, though, and in opposition to them – have changed over time” (p. xiv). *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation* is a must-read for those interested in postcoloniality, sovereignty, state violence, and affect theory.

In the monograph, Thomas uses post-colonial Jamaica to theorize sovereignty in relation to affect – tracing the relationship between sovereignty, violence and subjectivity. In so doing, she offers a way to examine the constitution of political subjects and subjectivity through the sensory dimensions of sovereignty. This theoretical intervention opens up space to interrogate the affective dimensions of socio-political struggle – how politics has *felt* at different temporal junctures and the political possibilities that are available at these junctures. Thomas further presents the concepts of *witnessing 2.0* – an embodied and moral practice that involves assuming responsibility for contemporary events and *repair* – an ethical and political practice of justice (p. 2). These conceptual interventions allow readers to understand both every day and moments of exceptional state violence as processes that deeply implicate civil society. Bearing witness to sovereign violence “...produces the need...to probe and acknowledge the extent to which we are complicit in its reproduction and therefore obligated to its transformation” (p. 220).

*Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation* consists of an Introduction, three chapters interspersed with interludes and a coda. Throughout the book, Thomas engages in thick description constructing rich and textured narratives. Further to, she compels the book’s audience to engage in a transmedial reading

of the subject matter with her presentation of visuals, from the cover art – a coloured photo of caskets of victims of the violence in Kingston – to the galleries that follow chapters one and two. Such methodological approaches recall the book’s origins as a visual ethnography: Thomas produced a film interviewing witnesses to the Incursion as well as co-curated a multimedia installation, *Bearing Witness: Four Days in West Kingston*, which opened at the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in November 2017. Scholars and students curious about experimental ethnography should look to Thomas’ works for inspiration.

Chapter One, “Doubt,” makes the case that the affective register of doubt characterizes neoliberal sovereignty in contemporary Jamaica. A dazzling display of storytelling, the chapter moves across time and space to bear witness to the days of the Incursion and its aftermath for the Tivoli Gardens community through the first-person narratives of residents and the forms of evidence given at the West Kingston Commission of Enquiry. Residents’ current reflections on the Incursion – captured as part of the film – punctuate these recollections. The chapter also presents a short but thorough survey of the development of policing in Jamaica and its use as a tool to discipline Black life. It closes with a gallery of coloured photos with biographies of the residents – a visual archive that Thomas likely hopes will move the reader to recognize the residents as fully human.

Chapter Two takes us from the contemporary moment back to the early years of post-independence. Focused on the Rastafari movement, principally Claudius Henry and the rise and decline of his International Peacemakers’ Association, it argues that the period of the late 1960s to the 1970s was a time of political expectancy where many Jamaicans, particularly working class Blacks, envisioned an alternative political vision of development rooted in an elaboration of Black personhood. The chapter also details the connections between the International Peacemakers’ Association and the cultivation of a Black support base for Michael Manley’s People’s National Party during this period. Of note, the chapter dedicates space to Edna Fisher – a key supporter of Claudius Henry and the Association. Thomas’ work in this chapter unearths and recovers a period of Jamaica’s political life that is perhaps still relatively unknown; and, calls attention to the invisibility of women’s agency in socio-political struggle in Jamaica.

Chapter Three goes further back in history, returning us to 1950s Jamaica at the height of the Cold War. Here, Thomas argues that Jamaica’s national security concerns related to Black radicalism and Rastafari became entangled with growing anti-communist paranoia on the part of the United Kingdom and later the United States, shaping the parameters and possibilities of sovereignty. At the same time, American labour interests’ intervention in the trade union movement after the expulsion of the radical wing of the People’s National Party in 1952 further weakened left unionism and brought Jamaica deeper into the US imperial web.

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In between the chapters, Thomas offers digressions that speak to other critical moments in Jamaica's political development. "Interlude I: Interrogating Imperialism" discusses historian William Macmillan's and journalist Katrin Norris' visits to Jamaica in the 1930s and 1960s respectively. The second interlude "Naming Names" details the intensification of American interests in a newly independent Jamaica in the context of the Cold War. The book concludes with a coda in which Thomas discusses the concept of repair – a redemptive politics rooted in relationality where mutual responsibility to each other is the foundation of our socio-political communities.

Thomas gives us a deeply captivating book that manages to condense a substantial amount of archival and empirical information while remaining accessible. From the Preface to the Notes, the book offers a treasure trove of data and stories for further mining. *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation* is a monograph that scholars and graduate students in anthropology, political science, history, postcolonial studies, and Latin American and Caribbean studies will appreciate and find particularly instructive for its historical accounting, conceptual interventions as well as its methodology.

Tka Pinnock, York University  
tkapin@yorku.ca