



Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

[Review of: D.A. Thomas (2011) *Exceptional Violence. Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*]

Oostindie, G.J.

published in

European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies
2012

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Oostindie, G. J. (2012). [Review of: D.A. Thomas (2011) *Exceptional Violence. Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*]. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 93, 130-131.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the KNAW public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the KNAW public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

pure@knaw.nl

– *Exceptional Violence. Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*, by Deborah A. Thomas. Duke University Press, 2011.

Among many Latin American and Caribbean countries with similar problems, Jamaica stands out as a state characterized by extremely high rates of criminality and homicides, as a society characterized by ‘exceptional violence’. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Unlike most of the other former British West Indies, Jamaica was already marked by high levels of criminality in the mid-twentieth century. At the time of the country’s transition to independence in 1962, political parties were already aligning themselves with local gangs. This phenomenon was brought to a bloody climax in the 1980 elections, when political gang violence demanded a toll of 800 murders. Since then, levels of violence have gone down again, but there have been several new rounds of bloodshed. Thus statistics for 2007 put Jamaica in the same category of per capita murder rates as Colombia and South Africa. Anthropologist Deborah Thomas describes how it was impossible for her, conducting field work in this period, to escape this tragedy: ‘violence surrounded me and everyone else in and around Kingston’, imposing a condition of alertness even at night: ‘a sort of sleeping with one eye perpetually open’ (p. 2).

Why this violence? Of course, as any study on crime in Latin America and the Caribbean will state, poverty and highly skewed income distribution matter. So do the mechanisms that go with narco-trafficking and drug use. While acknowledging these factors, Thomas delves deeper, making the case that a long history of colonialism and particularly slavery continues to make a lasting imprint on Jamaican society. At the same time, she strongly opposes culturalist explanations for the high levels of violence. In her view, such explanations have little explanatory value and reflect colonial prejudice if not outright racism. Thus she also presents her study as a contribution to ‘the liberation of American anthropology from those aspects of its history that privileged a focus on diffusion, traits, and personality’ (p. 4). Instead, she argues throughout the book ‘that violence is not a cultural phenomenon but an effect of class formation, a process that is immanently racialized and gendered’ (p. 4).

In five chapters and a coda, Thomas leads us through the times of slavery and colonialism, decolonization and the agonies of independence, including the massive emigration and hence the formation of a transnational community. Violence indeed is a central element in all of this history, ‘predatory, violent, and illegal forms of rule’ (p. 13). Thanks to colonialism, Thomas argues, ‘democracy in the Americas [sic, at large – GO] has been founded on a house of cards’ (p. 13). This analysis then leads up to the coda of this densely written and erudite book, a passionate argument in favour of reparations for Atlantic slavery in general and more specifically for the long-standing tradition of suppressing the ‘African’ element in Jamaican identity. Here reparations are presented as the requisite ‘framework for thinking’ (pp. 231, 238).

Exceptional Violence is a complicated study. The book has limited but very engaging parts on fieldwork, but the author’s reflections on anthropological work and the ways this discipline functions politically seem to be more central to the book. In her analysis of the way anthropology deals with violence, slavery, inequity, crime, and so on, Thomas demonstrates broad reading and a highly critical mind. Small wonder then, both John Comaroff (University of Chicago) and David Scott (Columbia University) provided abundant praise for the blurb.

This praise and my admiration for Thomas' erudition and critical engagement notwithstanding, I could not help but wonder about a couple of questions while reading the book to its end. First, if the legacy of slavery and British colonialism indeed conditioned the omnipresence of violence in Jamaica, then why is it that other former British West Indian states are not characterized by the same levels of violence? Second, while it obviously makes sense to criticize a sort of primordial approach that blames 'diffusion, traits, and personality' (p. 4) for exceptional violence or whatever other problem in any given society, I fail to understand why violence, even if it is, as Thomas writes, the effect of an immanently racialized and gendered class formation, may not become deeply engrained in a society as a rather stable cultural phenomenon. And finally, we may either sympathize or not with Thomas' closing statement that 'Reparations is *the* framework through which we must view contemporary inequalities', as anything else is 'a capitulation to the more conservative aspects of multiracial nationalist discourse and to the demands of a so-called post-racial cosmopolitan vision of citizenship that threatens to become intractable in the neoliberal era' (p. 238). But surely this approach to the 'liberation of American anthropology' (p. 4) will not be shared by all practitioners of the discipline, and it will be impossible to find a scholarly argument to say that this is *the* exclusive framework for future analysis.

Gert Oostindie,

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

– *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics (The Latin America Readers)*, compilado por Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, Elizabeth Oglesby. Duke University Press, 2011.

Cuando se realiza una reseña de un libro uno espera encontrarle algún resquicio que permita el lucimiento del comentarista. Para *The Guatemala Reader* esta pretensión sería mezquindad. Los constructores de esta Babel guatemalteca, dan cuenta de la complejidad del país y logran hacerlo traducible en un comprensivo y generoso trabajo. Para quienes hemos vivido y padecido Guatemala es un guiño que nos provoca reacciones y reflexiones y que se hace extensivo a los lectores. Todos los sucesos, procesos, dimensiones que se cruzan en la historia de América hacen sentido en Guatemala en algún momento, en algún lugar, y no es fácil recoger el cúmulo de experiencias que destila este pequeño laboratorio del continente.

Greg Grandin, historiador, Deborah Levenson, historiadora antropóloga, y Elizabeth Oglesby, geógrafa; combinan sus competencias como alquimistas sociales, su profesionalidad va más allá de su erudición y su pasión no se estanca en la anécdota. Esta triada editora académica, han hecho de Guatemala un motivo de lucha política y de vidas ligadas a redes de la iglesia católica, de derechos humanos, de colaboración campesinas, y vinculados a la academia desde el compromiso de investigación. Desde estas plataformas nos escogen significativas etnografías y análisis de otros investigadores guatemaltecos y extranjeros de alto nivel.

Por este compromiso la posición de esta compilación se mueve en el plano político, criterio sobre el que gira el ordenamiento de la información en nueve partes, donde desde el tercer acápite van a concentrarse en el último siglo y la actuali-