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SPEAKING OF VIOLENCE

Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty,
Witnessing, Repair

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***Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair.*
Thomas, Deborah A. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 368pp. \$28.95
Paperback.**

Over the past decades, Deborah A. Thomas has brought public injustices in Jamaica to public view through a method she calls “Witnessing 2.0,” a different sort of bearing witness that combines use of archival materials and social justice advocacy. To reveal government atrocities occurring during the 1963 Coral Gardens “incident” in which hundreds of Rastafarians were tortured over a land dispute, Thomas interviewed older members of the community, filming and recording their recollections. These were included in *Bad Friday: Rastafari after Coral Gardens* (2011), directed by Thomas, John Jackson, and Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn, a documentary screened at various North American university campuses before officially premiering at the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston. Now it is permanently featured at the National Gallery of Jamaica and Institute of Jamaica in the Rastafari exhibit, informing visitors young and old of this largely forgotten incident. This documentary’s impact in restoring public consciousness of this wrong influenced Prime Minister Andrew Holness to make an official apology to the Rastafarian community in 2017, along with the promise of reparative benefits for survivors. Having marked the practical results of her intervention to resurrect the legacy of the 1963 Coral Gardens “incident,” now Thomas engages with a significantly more immediate – and thus, more dangerous – episode in Jamaican history, involving global, as well as local governments.

In this new documentary project, Thomas explores the 24 May 2010 Tivoli Gardens “incident,” in which Christopher “Dudus” Coke, an alleged gun-and-drug-runner, was forcibly extracted from his West Kingston Neighborhood and extradited to the United States by request of that country. Jamaican Prime Minister Bruce Golding’s decision to order police and military forces to capture Coke resulted in a stand-off and curfew lasting a month. Ultimately, seventy-five civilians were killed according to government figures, though community members argue that total casualties were closer to two hundred. By “archiving violence,” Thomas performs a “transmedial reading,” as expressed in her Preface (xv). Achieving “Witnessing 2.0,” “a quotidian practice of watching, listening, and feeling that is relational and profoundly intersubjective,” requires successive feminist actions similar, in her descriptive imagery, to textile unravelling and restoration. Thomas claims,

This solution is geared toward (1) taking seriously embodies ways of knowing and understanding in an effort to (2) track the long-term entanglements that have produced and sustained the binaries structuring our modern world so that we find ways to (3) undo dualistic modalities of thinking and acting in order to (4) generate meaningful forms of repair...this repair must be generated through the “real love”...of deep recognition. (19).

Reflecting the scattered and diverse nature of her archival avenues, the remainder of the volume is divided into an Introduction and three chapters, divided by two “Interludes,” and ended by a “Coda.” Directing, not dictating the narrative, Thomas enlists structural apparatuses from other artistic disciplines, such as musicology or performance, to punctuate the sounds of other voices.

Chapter I, “Doubt,” begins with a walk, as Thomas and a cinematographer follow a local named Annette into the Tivoli Garden streets where it all happened to meet those still grappling with the losses they sustained from between May and June of 2010. Questions remain unanswered and no compensation or official explanation has been given to the community for the excessive violence that took place there at the command of the government. Thomas observes, “doubt demands that we ask questions about complicity, accountability, obligation, and futurity, and these are the questions sovereign violence should ultimately produce” (24). Each eyewitness account is introduced separately, but in time with the chronology of known events, forcing identification with a human being, presence in a geographical place within a hellish moment. For instance, Thomas states, “If you were a woman with children in Tivoli Gardens during the incursion, you might have had an experience like Claudette Morgan’s on that Monday morning of 24 May. That day, Claudette got up and made breakfast, doing her normal chores around the house” (26). As gunfire erupts, helicopters, and snipers appear, this woman’s sedate everyday existence evaporates, leaving her imprisoned with her family within the walls of their home. Suspicious deaths, unknown ends, bodies left in the morgue for identification begin to pile up as the pages turn. Such doubt, according to Thomas, is a consequence of neo-liberal sovereignty.

Pausing in the midst of these personal accounts of those violent days in Tivoli Gardens, Thomas traces a pattern of government elimination of rebellious black bodies in Jamaica, from

nineteenth century slave revolts and the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion to funding of the police force by the United States, Great Britain, and Canada in the twentieth century and the establishment of a mutual extradition pact between Ronald Reagan's America and Jamaica in 1983. In a 2014 session before the Commission of Enquiry, former Police Commissioner Owen Ellington was confronted with images of individuals wearing bullet proof vests and testimony of US drones flying overhead. He argued the former could be criminals wearing stolen vests and denied all knowledge of the latter, his testimony "inviting doubt" (37), according to Thomas. Drone footage acquired by journalist Mattathias Schwartz has corroborated many details of locals' testimony (44). Trapped between the armed forces and criminals of Ellington's dubious testimony, the civilians Thomas describes are forgotten, relegated to the status of victims until their stories are heard through filmed and printed testimony. Thomas sees that as she and her crew capture these recollections, many exhibit wariness by avoiding Coke's name and claiming ignorance of the lead-up to the armed conflict, their "public secret" (49).

Before Interlude I, "Interrogating Imperialism," Thomas includes color photographs of survivors she interviewed and encountered in Tivoli Gardens, which were displayed from November 2017-December 2019 at Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in West Kingston as part of the "Bearing Witness: Four Days in West Kingston" display by Varun Baker. Faces gaze at the viewer, some smiling and grasping others posing with them, others not bothering to conceal the uncertainty and pain. Each is accompanied by a name and date of their birth, along with a description of their experience of the "incident." Especially noticeable are the names and faces of previous storytellers, such as Marjorie Williams, mother of two black men killed execution-style by masked police as she helplessly watched. In Interlude I, Thomas begins to pull at longer threads, expounding historical reasons for the suffering experienced by residents in Tivoli Gardens, a tragedy long in the making. Late nineteenth and twentieth century British officials took an alarmist position in relation to the post-plantation social system, stressing the need for control of the populace, fearing a repeat of the Morant Bay Rebellion. By contrast, political theorists warned of the far-reaching consequences of excessive authoritarian behavior towards black Jamaicans. Readers will find this a valuable historical and research narrative demonstrating the persistence of prominent colonial attitudes in Jamaican government.

Interviewing followers of the late Reverend Claudius Henry in Chapter 2, "Expectancy," Thomas examines the life of an influential community leader whose activities often threatened the official status quo. She references his conviction for treason following a 1960 raid that revealed his son Ronald's plans to invade an African colony, in an attempt to "return to Africa," leaving Jamaica to Fidel Castro. Following his release in 1966, the Reverend resolved to build a Jamaican Africa in both the spiritual and economic sense, setting up a bakery business that employed hundreds, if not thousands of workers from the community. Over time, as the financial rewards from this business fed families and helped the neighborhood to thrive, Henry's vision of autonomy and self-respect became a reality. Describing their attraction to Henry's message, his followers speak of resonating with his words and identifying him with God in the tradition of

deifying Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, a symbol of hope to those of African descent. At the same time, Henry's clean-shaven imperative put him and his Peacemakers group at odds with Rastafari while his successful enterprise created tensions among other merchants. Connecting "charismatic prophecy" to "political expectancy," Thomas suggests its frequent appearance is due to its acknowledgement of deeply entangled social, economic, political, and racial systems inherited from the plantation, which continue to make their mark in Jamaican culture (92). A second series of photographs and scans reveal the story of this religious community, which eventually was economically starved out of the bakery business by local competitors backed by the government and fell prey to in-fighting possibly stoked by double agents in their midst.

Tracing increasingly stringent twentieth-century CIA and U.S. governmental activities in Jamaica, in Interlude II "Naming Names," Thomas links the Jamaican garrison with Nixon's War on Drugs (1971), both responsible for the excessive action on Tivoli Gardens in retrospect. Chapter 3, "Paranoia," claims this feeling to be at play in the political landscape and appearing in newspaper and surveillance archives of the twentieth century, evident not only in the anxiety of British colonial governments and their successors, but also in U.S. responses to political, economic, and military threats. While not always unfounded, Thomas claims this paranoia led governments to seek "the active destabilization of anything resembling Marxist-inspired thought or action" (153). Financial and political efforts led to the downfall and rise of several political parties that were perceived to be unifying black Jamaicans. Slums were cleared, as hotbeds of resistance, ironically leading to the erection of Tivoli Gardens itself. The United States financed many of these endeavors, possibly explaining the strange ease with which its foreign military could later enter and establish temporary control over these Kingston spaces.

Unexpectedly, in the Coda, Thomas links her work as an anthropologist with a former interest in dance, seeing herself as needing to enact what she witnesses in order to fully be human. At first this felt a little jarring to the introductory metaphor of disentanglement. How can taking things apart simultaneously involve physical experience of movement? Upon further reflection the motion of dance is not so different from following these threads with the body, traveling the lines from the present to the past to see other experiences. After all, the subtitle of Thomas's book is "sovereignty, witnessing, repair," pointing to the multi-pronged recuperative efforts of acknowledging, observing, and redressing. She connects these activities to her reconciliation with Jamaican and American heritages, histories of struggles and negotiations, a complicated dance of personal meaning if there ever was one. Strangely for a culture in which history is commonly set to music, Thomas writes that there are as yet, no songs about the Tivoli Gardens incident. In an attempt to give a voice and healing to that community, her book evidently participates in the form, if not sound of music.

In places, Thomas's exhaustive historical narratives of aftermaths and antecedent events in Jamaican history can seem a slight distraction from the stories of Tivoli Gardens survivors. There are also non-chronological theoretical discussions and implications that are introduced later in the book, like the photographs, whereas a reader might expect such helpful information

to be situated prior to the interviews and appear in historical order. Imagining Thomas as performing an act of weaving explains the structural interruptions as being placed to destabilize an easy and conventional progression, Thomas's ultimate point about the ideological difficulty and multi-faceted process of pursuing "Witnessing 2.0." For anyone seeking a way in to pursuing greater understanding of Jamaican history and of contemporary imperialist activities, this work is an excellent starting point from which to delve back. By unraveling a tangled web, it performs a complicated dance, leaving plenty of strands for the inquisitive reader to follow in the pursuit of buried truths.