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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5z13v661>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 5(1)

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T851019712

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SPECIAL FORUM

The Problem with Violence: Exceptionality and Sovereignty in the New World

DEBORAH A. THOMAS

When I first moved to Philadelphia during the summer of 2006—a very hot summer that saw the number of homicides in the city spike—I was struck by the media discourses of violent crime. Newspaper headlines screamed about the “two Philadelphias”—Center City where, as the spatially reckoned crime map showed, no murders had happened in the previous year; and North, Southeast and Southwest Philadelphia, where clusters of dots crowded on the page. These spatial maps, perhaps unsurprisingly, were also racialized, with African-Americans comprising the majority population in North and Southwest Philadelphia (as much as 92.4%, for example, in North Philadelphia), while only making up five to six percent of the population in Center City.¹ Gangs were discussed, as were their potential connections to various levels of municipal politics; Philadelphia was declared the most murderous city, per capita, in the United States; and lamentations about how to tackle this “culture of violence” gained full speed.² I wasn’t entirely sure I had left Kingston, where the uptown/downtown socio-political, economic, and spatial binary shapes residents’ expectations about how, where, and why violent crime happens, and where a cultural discourse about violence is exceedingly difficult to dislodge.

Indeed, for many observers, the violent and often spectacular crime that takes place in particular Caribbean areas is evidence of a failure to create a growth-oriented economy and morally progressive ethos. It is a problem of culture, a mark of backwardness, an unsuccessful movement from savagery, or a failure to take advantage of post-World War II opportunities for development in political, economic, and socio-cultural fields. At the very least, it is something that marks the Caribbean—

as well as some spaces within Latin America—as seeming to have taken a different path in relation to other New World trajectories. This is an issue I have treated at length elsewhere.³ In this paper, I want to use the case of Jamaica—itsself often portrayed as exceptional within the region—to think through how, when, and why the US is, on one hand and from one perspective, written out of these narratives and, on the other and from alternative vantage points, central to them. In doing so, I want to emphasize the long-standing transnational dimension of violence in the post-colonial Americas, situating the New World as a single sphere of experience, in order to say something about the relationships among violence, the exploitation and settlement of the New World, sovereignty, and the various phases of modern capitalism.

As an exercise toward this conceptual agenda, I want to place critical accounts of post-colonial and republican violence in dialogue with each other, in this case Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* and Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace's edited volume *American Violence: A Documentary History*.⁴ In doing so, I want to argue that if we were serious about understanding the contemporary New World as the legacy of the processes I so briefly mentioned above, then we would see the Americas as a place where the existence and value of non-European life is constantly under debate, a place where scientific management is still organized in racial terms (newly conceptualized through genetic mapping), and where racio-cultural “othering” has become the primary modality through which exceptionality has gained both visibility and political purchase.⁵ I will start by outlining some of the important convergences in Mbembe's and Hofstadter's theories of violence in order to situate the US within broader new world trajectories, and will then move to discuss how for 20th century Caribbean observers, the US also becomes a new site of sovereign power, reflecting geopolitical and socio-economic shifts characteristic of the long twentieth century in the Western hemisphere. I will argue that the current context of multiple and overlapping sovereignties nevertheless recalls and reproduces the earlier foundational dimensions of sovereign violence, and in particular those that reckon value through the rubric of race.

Space, Time, and the Multivocality of Sovereign Entanglements

Many theoretical accounts of imperial violence have focused on the second moment of imperial conquest, the “carving up of Africa” in the late 19th century. Achille Mbembe's work has been seminal here, particularly regarding the ways the past continues in the present. In his exploration of the relationships between colonialism and subjectivity, his notion of time is one of “entanglement.” “As an age,” Mbembe argues, “the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another.” It is this layering of temporalities, and not a more linear sense of time, that creates “an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain

their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.”⁶ Mbembe uses these senses of interlocking and entanglement to explore the various ways in which and institutions through which the violence of colonial rule has continued beyond the nationalist period. For him, imperial state sovereignty is rooted in what he calls “commandement,” a sense of exceptional *right* that was both arbitrary and total, the polar opposite of the liberal state ideal. Because of this overdrawn sense of arbitrary right, violence was the foundation of colonial sovereignty through the processes both of conquest and meaning making. The violence of conquest, Mbembe argues, was converted into supreme authority, which was subsequently spread through the minutiae of day-to-day life: “What marked violence in the colony was, as it were, its miniaturization; it occurred in what might be called the details. It tended to erupt at any time, on whatever pretext and anywhere. It was deployed in segmentary fashion, in the form of micro-actions which, becoming ever smaller, were the source of a host of petty fears.”⁷ This “web” of everyday violence produced a total system of authority without justice or legitimacy, an authority wielded over the newly-created category of “native,” both subject and object of imperial rule, and it is this system of state governance that was inherited by post-colonial governments, which, despite efforts to overturn old hierarchies, reproduced them in the form of new elites—businessmen and civil servants.

There are many elements of Mbembe’s analysis that ring true for Caribbean contexts, and others that do not. For example, Mbembe argues that in many cases, “state domination . . . was achieved through the old hierarchies and old patronage networks,” and that this led to a privatization of public resources and the socialization of arbitrariness.⁸ Where conquest led to the development of plantation-based export-oriented slave economies—the frontiers of modern capitalism—these kinds of patronage networks did not come into existence until much later (nor, I would argue, did a notion of “the state”). Secondly, for Mbembe, colonial dominance, though absolute and arbitrary, “conceived itself as also carrying a *burden*, which yet is not a contract. . . . [T]he colonial potentate also portrays itself as a *free gift*, proposing to relieve its object of poverty and free it from debased condition by raising it to the level of a human being.”⁹ Again, this formulation and sense of a civilizing mission is something that wouldn’t emerge until after the abolition of slavery in the New World, a process that itself prompted a rethinking of the imperial project and method more generally.

Because of these divergent historical experiences, I have wanted to push our sense of post-colonial time—and thus of colonialism as a particular modality of violence—backward to the 15th and 16th centuries, to that first period of exploration and imperial conquest that resulted in the elaboration of a notion of the modern West. After all, when Aimé Césaire discussed imperialism as “thing-ification,” the complete dehumanization of both colonizer and colonized, he was referring to the processes that generated Martinique, not Cameroon or Senegal or elsewhere in sub-

Saharan Africa.¹⁰ It is this first phase of conquest, colonization, the destruction of native populations and their replacement through various forms of slavery that saw violence deployed in the service of, among other things, the consolidation of both empires and nationalism within Europe, *and* the related institutionalization (through labor regimes) of the notions of difference that subsequently would be mobilized to serve the late 19th century project of indirect imperial rule.¹¹

This was a project that would ultimately result in the emergence of various strands of Social Darwinism in which the racially inferior “other” would become biologized as the Native.¹² Where “natives” could be the “raw material of government,”¹³ however, slaves could not, and it would not be until after the West Indies-wide labor rebellions in the 1930s when interventions would be initiated *at the level of government* to begin grappling with development and welfare, and therefore with the biopolitical management of West Indian populations. In other words, the modernity that was brought into being by the exploitation and settlement of the New World is foundationally tethered to the racialized mobilization of exceptional sovereignty, and this mobilization, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Wendy Brown (2006),¹⁴ among others, have argued, is never fully superseded by governmentality, though these processes may appear somewhat differently in West Indian (and more broadly, New World) plantation contexts.¹⁵

Contemporary patterns of violence in the New World, then, cannot be seen as exceptional—here used to signify aberration, a random deviation from an otherwise well-functioning liberalism—but instead as part of a longer foundational trajectory related to processes of colonial sovereignty. These are processes that, as Mbembe shows us, have to do with extractive economics and an emergent hegemony related to the social relations of power and inequality required to maintain this economic system. For him, this consensus reflects an “*institutionalization of social divisions*,” a legitimation and obscuration of unequal property and rights relations through the promises of mass consumption and, during the earlier part of the twentieth century, a welfare state that regulated the economy and provided the social goods that markets could not. These processes discouraged overt resistance, he argues, because the ideological and institutional structures of colonial authority become part of people’s “common sense,” a fetish, in this case, of state power.¹⁶ He writes:

Such transformations were only possible because, despite the violence of labor struggles—themselves integrative and useful in the formation of collective identities—wage-earners and employers shared what might be called a *common material imaginary*, production itself being perceived on both sides as a social good. Thanks to the mechanisms that consisted in institutionalizing the antagonisms on the basis of a representation of interests, to the full exercise of the suffrage, and to the downgrading

of force as the sole remedy to social problems, the conflicts within society were cooled. In this way, revolutions in the name of ending poverty were kept at bay.¹⁷

Mbembe's claim here broadly suggests a consensus, one that echoes historian Richard Hofstadter's famous formulation for the US context.

In his examination of American political leadership from the founding fathers to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hofstadter argued that regardless of differences of opinion on particular issues, these leaders “shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man.”¹⁸ For him, the consistent privileging of individual property rights—rights that we know were institutionally reckoned through the elaboration of racial and gendered hierarchies—yielded a kind of conservatism in relation to national sovereignty, one that was rooted in the acceptance of capitalist development. Famously—and cynically—in his early seminal work, Hofstadter wrote, “Almost the entire span of American history under the present Constitution has coincided with the rise and spread of modern industrial capitalism. In material power and productivity the United States has been a flourishing success. Societies that are in such good working order have a kind of mute organic consistency. They do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements. Such ideas may appear, but they are slowly and persistently insulated, as an oyster deposits nacre around an irritant.”¹⁹ Like Mbembe, Hofstadter is thinking about the “*common material imaginary*” that shapes social relationships within capitalist systems of material production and consumption in extractive settler colonies. Implicitly, this is a form of structural violence, one that engenders the conservatism that, according to him, is more generally characteristic of both material and symbolic violence in the United States.

For Hofstadter, what is exceptional about violence in the US is that despite its frequency and commonplaceness, it is largely forgotten and does not ultimately challenge the dominant narratives of American subjectivity, themselves framed in relation to democratic sovereignty and liberal notions of freedom and equality. In large part, he argues, this is because violence in the United States has not typically been directed at the state, but has been framed as “civil strife” bearing little relationship to notions and practices of political freedom: “An arresting fact about American violence, and one of the keys to understanding of its history, is that very little of it has been insurrectionary. Most of our violence has taken the form of action by one group of citizens against another group, rather than by citizens against the state. . . . And this is one of the reasons why so much of our violence has been buried away in our historical memory.”²⁰ He continues that this purported lack of anti-state revolutionary impetus is what identifies American violence as conservative: “[Violence] has been unleashed against abolitionists, Catholics, radicals, workers and

labor organizers, Negroes, Orientals, and other ethnic or racial or ideological minorities, and has been used ostensibly to protect the American, the Southern, the white Protestant, or simply the established middle-class way of life and morals. A high proportion of our violent actions has thus come from the top dogs or the middle dogs.”²¹ In fact, Hofstadter asserts, instances of the most spectacular violence have tended to occur when state authority is brought in to protect property or disperse crowds. Despite this, he notes, the legitimacy of state authority has never been significantly undermined. Therefore, he argues, “[t]he United States has thus been able to endure an extraordinary volume of violence without developing a revolutionary tradition, and indeed while maintaining a long record of basic political stability.”²² In this analysis, as in Mbembe’s, state violence is an enduring feature of everyday existence, one that suffuses those forms of group violence he lists as chronic in the United States—riots, industrial violence, lynching, vigilantism, and slave revolts as well as their suppression.

It seems curious that neither of the two seminal reviews of the body of Hofstadter’s work mention *American Violence*, despite the fact that it clearly carries through some of the main themes in his scholarship: a history of conservative “consensus;” an emphasis in the United States on property rights; and the dangers of populism and anti-intellectualism.²³ Indeed, these are the characterizations of American society that lead Hofstadter to conclude that American violence is most usually determined by ethnic, religious, and racial mixture as these are conditioned by a context of “weak government, localism, and the diffusion of authority and power; extraordinarily rapid urban growth, large-scale migrations, and rapid social change; the inability or unwillingness of urban Americans to relinquish their gun culture; and finally, the development in the nineteenth century of a type of socially unchecked industrial baron, often an absentee, lording it over a distant and heterogeneous ‘alien’ working force with which he felt no ethnic, institutional, social, or religious ties.”²⁴ These conditions should bring to mind those that have characterized West Indian (and North American) plantation societies before and after the abolition of slavery and, to a degree, sub-Saharan Africa during the long 20th century. Hofstadter did not himself see these connections, or if he did he did not write them into his oeuvre, but the entanglements between capitalism, individualism, the primacy of property rights, and the ongoing suppression of movements for self-determination on the part of marginalized and oppressed populations as foundational features of violence in the New World (the United States and beyond) should be clear. Hofstadter helps us recapture and appreciate these links by positioning violence as foundational to US national sovereignty, just as post-structuralist theorists like Mbembe position violence as foundational to colonial (and post-colonial) sovereignties.

The assertion I wish to make here is that placing Mbembe and Hofstadter in dialogue should allow for a recognition that, to bastardize James Clifford’s now cliché phrase, “we are all postcolonies now.”²⁵ In other words, the United States

does not stand outside the processes that constituted New World modernities, not least because of its early integration within the Atlantic system during the triangular trade, and we must therefore think hemispherically about the relationships among sovereignty, violence, and the reproduction of hierarchies and inequality over time.

Now, let me add a wrinkle to this seam. The early republicanism of the United States, while on one hand allowing us to “forget” these systemic commonalities through a kind of exceptionalism that gains its most massive expression after World War II, also generates additional sovereign processes with which other New World populations must contend. And in the late 20th and early 21st century contexts in which neoliberalism is experienced throughout the region as principally a US American-driven phenomenon, we now tend to conceptualize the violence-sovereignty relation as one that is transnational rather than oceanic. By this, I mean that the post-independence, post-World War II moment in Caribbean (and many Latin American) societies is characterized by multiple sovereignties. I want to think about this multiplicity, however, not as additive but rather as palimpsestic, akin to the ways Shona Jackson analyzes how colonial exploration and settlement of the New World created notions of what it meant to be Creole or Indigenous, notions that were subsequently mobilized by joining political and material rights through the discursive frame of labor in order to exclude indigenous populations from nationalist belonging.²⁶ In other words, as Mbembe also shows us, older patterns of sovereignty are never fully eclipsed by newer ones, and we must therefore strive to see the ghosts of earlier entanglements, even if we understand the contemporary US role in the region primarily in terms of imperialism—a process that itself also begins in the late 19th century with the “closing” of the American western frontier and the intervention in Cuba’s long war for independence from Spain, events that become justifiable through the emergent “common material imaginary” of Social Darwinism and the institutionalization of anthropological notions of racialized civilizational difference. To give these arguments some meatier specificity, let me now turn to a discussion of relevant processes in Jamaica.

The United States in Jamaica

One of the ongoing features of public critique in Jamaica is the assertion that most social ills—and in particular, the consumerism and commodity fetishism of youth—are attributable to US dominance, especially in the realms of media and popular culture. For example, Jamaican literary and cultural critic Carolyn Cooper has argued that the performative posturing and spectacular violence associated with particular young people in Jamaica is the result of the “complicated socialization processes of Jamaican youths who learn to imitate and adapt the sartorial and ideological ‘style’ of the heroes and villains of imported movies.”²⁷ She goes on to assert that because it is relatively inexpensive for urban Jamaicans to go to the cinema and see the latest import from the United States, and because so many Jamaicans have access to

American television shows through legitimately or illegitimately procured cable connections, the influence of US versions of heroic masculinity and gun violence are inescapable, even for Jamaican filmmakers. These filmmakers, in turn, cannot help but reproduce “these distorted images” which “are greedily imbibed by gullible Jamaican youths searching for role models.”²⁸ Cooper supports this point by giving the example of dancehall star Ninjaman, who stated in an interview that seeing the 1972 Jamaican cult movie *The Harder They Come* made him want to become a cowboy. The movie, in her words, “created a taste for the feel of the gun.”²⁹ Cooper issues a caveat here, arguing that there is also an “indigenous tradition of heroic ‘badness’ that has its origins in the rebellious energy of enslaved African people who refused to submit to the whip of bondage.”³⁰ As a result, she argues that there is a certain degree of ambivalence about “badmanism” among Jamaicans, yet it is clear that for her, what we might call the “positive badness” of anti-slavery and anti-establishment freedom fighters cannot stand up, in the contemporary era, to what she understands as the “negative badness” of American popular culture.

Political scientist Obika Gray addresses similar issues in his explorations of what he calls “badness-honour” in Jamaica. In his *Demeaned but Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica*, Gray extends his earlier work on subaltern subjectivities and social movements in Jamaica.³¹ By way of an historical exegesis of gang violence in Kingston, he seeks to clarify the contours of the Jamaican state during the period leading up to independence and throughout the post-colonial era. Gray is particularly interested in how the state has negotiated, drawn legitimacy from, co-opted, and capitulated to what he calls “power from below,” and he thus foregrounds the ways the cultural practices and sensibilities of the urban lumpenproletariat have had a critical hand in forging the taken-for-granted shape of politics in Jamaica. Gray’s book, however, is an attempt not only to characterize the Jamaican state, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to understand the social dynamics of subject formation among urban lower-class Jamaicans and how these have changed since the 1940s. This is where he expands on his earlier arguments regarding the role of American popular culture in the development of Jamaican “badmanism.”

Like Cooper, Gray focuses on the ways American cinema, and particularly the Hollywood Westerns that were shown at theatres in many working-class neighborhoods in Kingston, projected “images of savage violence, animated gunplay and romantic melodrama [that] proved compelling for the cinema-going poor.”³² For Gray, the Westerns’ moral codes in which “good” (white cowboys) always triumphed over “evil” (Indians, often) was not only popular entertainment but also a form of ideological socialization which, coupled with the newsreels also shown in the theatres, “affirmed the virtues of American society and the moral struggle of the United States against communism and other evils.” Through cinema, therefore, as well as popular music, radio broadcasts of American evangelists, magazines like *Time* and *Photoplay*, Disney comics, and American visitors themselves, the Jamaican poor

could not escape the bombardment of American culture and its assertions of universality.³³

Gray argues that “the simulacrum of American experience”³⁴ was not the only influence on Jamaican lumpen throughout the second half of the twentieth century—he also cites particular strains of Africanity (Rastafarianism, among others), a waning British influence, and the emergent political institutions—but it seems to emerge as the dominant one, especially by the 1960s. This is when, he argues, Rastafarian cultural nationalism mixed with Hollywood gangsterism, a mixture that wedded race pride and criminality to produce “hybrid social types—neither wholly Jamaican or fully North American in sensibility.” For Gray, this is the origin of “badness-honour,” a repertoire of power that rests upon the “affirmation of a violent, stylized outlawry *in the name of rescuing a racially impugned self.*”³⁵ Yet the purported “hybridity” of this figure seems to present a problem, in that it implies an aborted process of indigenization. He argues that while some inner-city dwellers were able to creatively adopt and adapt American popular forms in Jamaican idiom, Gray states, for the majority this was not possible:

Indeed, locals with limited or no direct contact with American society and culture experienced nostalgia for the culture and ambience of that nearby industrial society as if it were their own. One consequence of this de-territorializing effect of America’s cultural reach was that many among the urban poor experienced a palpable cultural disruption. For many Jamaicans, there was a disjuncture between the misery and hardships of their lived experience on the island and the imagined experience of participating in the material well-being, consumer tastes and popular culture imported from a highly industrialized society. This contact with distant American others through travel, film, music, radio broadcasts and pulp fiction therefore transported Jamaicans—including large contingents of the urban poor—into an American-dominated and worldwide political, economic and cultural space.³⁶

While it is true that the United States became the dominant cultural, political, and economic force in the Caribbean in the mid-twentieth century, this paragraph raises many questions. What does Gray mean by “cultural disruption”? What does this look like? What are its effects? Is the kind of “cultural disruption” occasioned by American media qualitatively different from that occasioned by British colonialism? If so, how? Is “nostalgia” for American ways of life distinct from the nostalgia for empire that is sometimes expressed at all levels of Jamaican society? Beyond a short

description of some musical performers, influenced by the figure of the Black American hipster, we don't get any concrete examples of how Gray is linking American *popular cultural* influence to the development of political gangsterism in Jamaica.

While Cooper and Gray are here concerned with circulations of symbolic and expressive cultural practices, it is also the case that material circulations of guns and drugs also fuel violence in Jamaica. The Caribbean has long been a transshipment point for the drug trade between South and North America, and a gun trade has also flourished along this route. In 2009 and 2010, several newspaper articles addressed this, arguing that as much as 80 percent of the firearms in Jamaica originate in the United States, with Haiti also being a significant point of origin.³⁷ This is the result, one police commissioner argues, of lax gun control laws in the United States, as well as a customs system that does not pay as much attention to what leaves the US as what enters: "It's a massive problem," said Leslie Green, a Jamaican assistant police commissioner. "There aren't any checks or any controls on goods leaving the United States. Yet anything leaving here, we have to make sure it's double-checked and triple-checked for drugs."³⁸ The re-emergence of the Caribbean as a drug and guns corridor has generated a concern with security on the part of the US government, and it is this concern that has become paramount in relation to US foreign policy concerns in the region, replacing the language of "development" that was dominant during the Cold War period.

This change was signaled most clearly in the establishment of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, inaugurated at the Summit of the Americas by President Obama in April 2009.³⁹ This new articulation of the Caribbean Basin Initiative purports to be concerned with economic assistance and development, yet this concern is belied by the FY 2011 budget figures. President Barack Obama requested the allocation of nearly \$73 million for both military and economic aid broken down as follows: \$37,463,000 for international narcotics control and law enforcement; \$18,160,000 for foreign military financing; and \$17,000,000 for economic support.⁴⁰ In other words, the militarization of security would receive the lion's share of US funding while the economic and social dimensions of security would remain significantly less elaborated. This sort of policy focus has led to the kind of tensions that were on display when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton toured the region in June 2010, ending her trip in Barbados by meeting with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders who were significantly more concerned with economic development than with transnational crime and drug-trafficking issues. Their complaint here was that the US government did not seem sufficiently inclined to appreciate the links between security and economic development.

Indeed, looking at the issue of drug trafficking and Caribbean gang violence through a diasporically-regional lens gives a better sense of what the dimensions of concern are on the part of the US government, as well as insight into views about how this concern should be managed. There are several significant examples I could

give here, including the recent reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, a nuclear aircraft carrier-equipped Navy armada that had been dismantled in 1950, or the Defense Cooperation Agreement signed by the United States and Colombia in 2009. But let me stick closer to home and talk about the scandal that erupted at the beginning of the summer of 2010 in Jamaica over the extradition request by the US for Christopher “Dudus” Coke, the purported leader of the Shower Posse and “don” of the West Kingston community of Tivoli Gardens.

This was a scandal that shook the ruling Jamaica Labour Party to the point that the opposition People’s National Party demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Bruce Golding. The scandal also turned Tivoli Gardens into a police state in late May and throughout the better part of June.⁴¹ The extradition request for Coke to stand trial in the United States on charges related to drug trafficking came in August 2009, but the Prime Minister—who was also the Member of Parliament for Tivoli Gardens—was not in a hurry to comply, and argued against the extradition on the grounds that the evidence against Dudus was obtained by wiretapping, a practice that is illegal under Jamaican law. In May 2010, after weeks of lying about it, Prime Minister Golding admitted in parliament that he had authorized the services of a US lobbying firm to pressure the US government to change their position on Coke. He agreed to sign the extradition order the following week, which led to the standoff between the security forces that had to find Dudus and the community members who were bent on protecting their leader at any cost. By the end of this standoff, at least seventy-three civilians were killed as the Jamaican Defense and Constabulary Forces attempted to penetrate the various roadblocks and fires community members had put up to deter them. Since then, *New Yorker* journalist Mattathias Schwartz reported that the United States had been involved with providing assistance to the Jamaican government in the form of live surveillance gathered by a plane flying above Tivoli Gardens in Kingston,⁴² confirming the information that circulated among Jamaicans on the day itself through Twitter and Facebook, information that the former Prime Minister also later conceded.⁴³

The Tivoli incursion (now known as the Labour Day War), however, can actually be said to have started earlier in May 2010, and not in the streets of Kingston but in Toronto, where more than 70 Shower Posse members were rounded up and arrested based on information gleaned from a nine-month investigation by the Canadian police in conjunction with US security and intelligence groups. Moreover, in June of that year, Richard Drayton of the *Guardian* pointed out how Jamaican security forces, with the assistance of those from the US, were carrying out their search for “Dudus” within Tivoli Gardens using tactics that were also being used by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁴ In the article, Drayton cites a manual on counterinsurgency operations of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that seems to have been based on a master’s thesis submitted by Major Wayne Robinson, a member of the Jamaican armed forces who was studying at the US Marine Corps University. The title of the thesis was “Eradicating Organised Criminal Gangs in Jamaica: Can Lessons be

Learned from a Successful Counterinsurgency?” The manual equates police action against “criminal organizations” with counterinsurgency, and describes key tactics and strategies, all of which were at the time being used in Tivoli Gardens.⁴⁵

Given all this, what can we say about the place of the United States in violence, symbolically and materially, in Jamaica? The accusations, both academic and popular, that the United States is the source of all slackness in Jamaica are founded on two presuppositions. The first has to do with the notion of boundedness that pervades these discussions. This is a boundedness that always predates a sort of contagion by what is outside (where Britain already exists on the inside). Yet, after 1776 there is really no point at which we cannot speak of an American cultural, economic, and political influence in the Caribbean, despite the fact that this only becomes dominant in the second half of the twentieth century. The second presupposition has to do with the sense that there is some kind of baseline where British influence is merely civil and institutional. This is a presupposition that leaves no room to explore the real institutional and ideological legacies of colonial sovereignty.

We should instead think about how contemporary violence in Jamaica has emerged from layered histories and therefore has layered, and sometimes unexpected, effects. On one hand, the legacy of British imperial slavery provides a template of spectacular techniques through which conquest over the bodies of others is either literal, as in both the expected and arbitrary forms of punishment meted out to slaves, or symbolic, as in the practices of displaying tortured and dismembered bodies in order to discourage breaches of the hegemonic order. This legacy does not disappear with decolonization, but is rather compounded and augmented by the new techniques of power associated with intensified US political, economic, and cultural influence after World War II. During this period, salient techniques of spectacularity include the opportunities for the cultivation of illicit wealth through association with drug and arms trades, the fostering of consumerist desires, and the promise of migration. Power over the body in this context is exemplified in similar techniques, including counterinsurgency strategies, but is also managed through regulations guiding who may or may not travel, and relatedly, who may or may not develop the power to consume (not only products, but also ideas and styles). Older patterns of colonial sovereignty, patterns that extended to and through the North American colonies, are thus dressed in the new clothes of nationalist, developmentalist, and security-oriented sovereignties, making real the various entanglements of time and space that have produced violence in the New World from its European exploration to today.

Exceptional Frontiers

Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, the state of bare life that obtains where the state of exception and sovereignty are one and the same, has proven attractive

to those concerned with the “zone[s] of non-being”⁴⁶ created through processes of imperial and neoliberal sovereignty. “*The camp*,” Agamben writes, “is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.”⁴⁷ However, if we see sovereignty as a form of power, as Judith Butler has argued, “that is fundamentally lawless, and whose lawlessness can be found in the way in which law itself is fabricated or suspended at the will of a designated subject,”⁴⁸ then we must understand the Americas as “ground zero,” as it were. In other words, the exceptional does not wait to become normative in post-World War II Europe and the United States (as Butler herself has argued, citing the internment camps into which Japanese-Americans were shuttled based on their presence as potential enemies within), but is the foundational socio-political arrangement of the New World. What I am trying to argue is that a notion of exceptionality as something that is “outside”—a camp that “begins to become the rule”—can encourage the perspective that the state of exception represents an unanticipated deviance from otherwise universalist democratic ideals, rather than a foundational and necessary status of exclusion that itself defines the legitimate body politic. This is a notion that Aimé Césaire brilliantly debunked in his *Discourse on Colonialism* by linking fascism not merely to late 19th century imperial adventures, as Hannah Arendt did in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but by rooting it squarely in the process of New World colonial exploitation: “What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.”⁴⁹

This is also what historian Eliga Gould was getting at when he wrote that the early eighteenth century Atlantic world constituted a zone of “chronic war and violence,” a “zone of conflicting laws where Britons were free to engage in forms of violence that were unacceptable (whether in Britain proper or in Europe’s law-bound state system).”⁵⁰ It is similarly articulated by Vincent Brown in his analysis of what he calls “mortuary politics”—the social and political meanings ascribed to beliefs and practices associated with death:

Early colonial Jamaica was much more than a failed settler society; it was an abundant garden of power and terror. Demographic turmoil, rather than terminating social development and stifling cultural practice, was a seedbed for particular forms of being, belonging, and striving appropriate to this world of relentless exploitation. It is thus less revealing to see the extravagant death rate in Jamaican society as an impediment to the formation of culture than it is to view it as the landscape of culture itself, the ground that produced Atlantic slavery’s most

meaningful idioms. Death served as the principal arena of social life and gave rise to its customs.⁵¹

In the 17th and 18th centuries, for these and other historians, Jamaica was organized—economically, politically, socially—to support mercantile capitalist development on the frontiers of the New World, frontiers that were nevertheless fully integrated within a broader system of Atlantic exploitation and exploitation.⁵²

For anthropologists of an earlier era, these frontier spaces would have been known as the culture spheres of “Plantation America,” that region from the eastern coastline of Brazil through the Guyanas and the Caribbean and into the southern United States, a region characterized by the plantation-based production (by a proto-proletariat, Sidney Mintz reminds us) of monocrops for export alongside small-scale peasant production of staples; rigid class lines within a context of multi-raciality; and “weak” community structures and “matrifocal” family organization.⁵³ For mid-twentieth century liberal anthropologists, and especially for those influenced by the “culture at a distance” and “culture and personality” studies that for a time dominated post-World War I research in the US, understanding the historical development of this culture sphere would “serve as a frame of reference for our studies of the contemporary societies and cultures of the Americas,” as Charles Wagley wrote,⁵⁴ just as for later economists—and especially those within the region—understanding the working of plantation economies would explain twentieth century industrialization and underdevelopment.⁵⁵

I have also been interested in the legacies of these early patterns, but not in order to argue for direct continuities between then and now. Instead, I have wanted to think about how we might position these historical patterns palimpsestically in relation to postcolonial state formation. If we understand Jamaica as initially having been explored, expanded, and exploited by the British as an exceptional space, and if by this we mean that the logics of social, economic, and political organization privileged the boom and bust cycles of capitalism rather than other more person-centered forms of social engineering, then we must think about the legacies of this history for both pre- and post-1865 colonial state formation as well as for postcolonial state formation. We must also think about the newer forms of sovereignty that draw from these early templates, while also being foundationally connected to them, to chart new repetitions of marginalization.

I could locate the urgency of writing about violence now in statistics. The Caribbean region as a whole has a murder rate higher than any other world region, and instances of assault throughout the Caribbean are significantly above the world average, with kidnapping becoming a growing phenomenon, especially in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. Violent crime statistics for the Caribbean are so high, in fact, that in 2007 the World Bank and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime issued a joint report identifying crime and violence as development issues, documenting how violence undermines growth, threatens human welfare, and

impedes social development.⁵⁶ Jamaica's per capita murder rate in 2009 reached 61.4 per 100,000 people,⁵⁷ a rate rivaled only by Colombia and South Africa.⁵⁸ But these statistics only tell us that violent acts are quantifiable and are used, and sometimes misused, by those who gather and deploy such numbers as a vector of comparison between groups. Statistical indices like these, and like the ones used to explain violent acts—such as those that chronicle the various failures of the Jamaican economy, or those that demonstrate practices of over-voting in politically affiliated communities in Kingston—do not, however, counter the assertion of Jamaica's exceptionality.

I prefer to locate the urgency of writing about violence now in relation to the assessments of sovereignty that filled the public sphere throughout 2012, the 50th anniversary year of Jamaica's independence. I want to argue that as we debate the degree to which formal independence achieved sovereignty, the ways it has been exercised within the country since 1962, and the extent to which the current global condition undermines it, we must focus on the *longue durée*, outlining the networks of power across time and space that created the conditions for the continuation of circulating repertoires of exceptional violence. In the case of Jamaica, this means recognizing that the story of contemporary violence is one that has a longer history than that which is usually told, and that the obscuring of this history masks the centrality of violence as an organizing principal of both personhood and colonial and postcolonial state formation. It also means that in order to understand the complex ways violence works to produce contemporary social life, we must probe the relationships between colonialism and post/neo-colonialism especially in relation to patterns of land use, configurations of socio-political authority, forms of punishment, systems of racial hierarchy, and projects of gendered and sexualized disciplining.

And finally, in order to gain some insight into how people attempt to make and remake themselves both through and in the context of extraordinary violence, we must conceptualize both modes of governance and practices of subjectivity in Jamaica—indeed in the New World more broadly—in relation to a transnational socio-economic, political and symbolic field. In other words, we need to be able to show how both governance and citizenship have been practiced and performed historically and in the present in relation to a context in which national sovereignty is not necessarily the only or even primary organizing principle for people's social, economic, political, and imagined worlds. It is this sort of framework that can ultimately dismantle the popular view that violence is a cultural phenomenon that is reproduced and passed from generation to generation, and that can promote instead the recognition that it is a complicated effect of the imbrication of the various structural legacies of conquest, settlement, and colonial exploitation and development common to the New World.

Notes

¹ The PEW Charitable Trusts, “A City Transformed: The Racial and Ethnic Changes in Philadelphia over the Last 20 Years” (Philadelphia, PA, June 1, 2011), http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Philadelphia-Population-Ethnic-Changes.pdf

² The *Philadelphia Inquirer* compiled a special package on violent crime in Philadelphia that chronicles the crime wave of the summer of 2006 and beyond. See http://www.philly.com/philly/news/special_packages/inquirer/violence/

³ Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

⁵ Harvey Neptune, “The Lost New World of Caribbean Studies: Recalling an un-American Puerto Rico Project,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 2 (July 2013): 172-185, inspired the overarching shape of this essay, and I thank him for hippping me to Hofstadter’s relevance to my own work on violence.

⁶ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 14, 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25, 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 19-20.

¹¹ See Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Michael Taussig, “Culture of Terror—Space of Death: Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 135-174; Sylvia Wynter, “Un-settling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation,” “Coloniality’s Persistence,” ed. Greg Thomas, Special Issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-338. Other scholars would push this origin story back even further. Irene Silverblatt, for example, argues that the Inquisition—as a modern bureaucracy—worked through processes of race-thinking in order to determine the guilt or innocence of “new Christians,” and Michel Rolph Trouillot has argued that contemporary understandings of racial difference actually have their origin in the 11th

century expulsion of the Moors from Europe. Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

¹² Wynter, “Un-settling the Coloniality.”

¹³ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 33.

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Wendy Brown, “Tolerance as Governmentality: Faltering Universalism, State Legitimacy, and State Violence” in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 78-106.

¹⁵ We have Ann Stoler to thank for drawing our attention to the ways Foucault’s non-engagement with processes of colonialism blinded him from a more thorough understanding of the relationship between empire and processes of state governance.

¹⁶ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 103-104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948), xxxvi-xxxvii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

²⁰ Hofstadter and Wallace, *American Violence*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ The volume is briefly noted in Eric Foner’s introduction to the 1992 edition of *Social Darwinism in American Thought* in order to suggest that Hofstadter’s interests were often influenced by the work of his graduate students, who themselves became involved in the Civil Rights and antiwar movements (Michael Wallace was his graduate student at the time of publication), and to argue that as a documentary volume, *American Violence* actually “offered a chilling record of political and social turbulence that utterly contradicted the consensus vision of a nation placidly evolving without serious disagreements.” Eric Foner, “Introduction,” *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), xxv. See also Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, “Richard Hofstadter: A Progress,” *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 300-367; Daniel Joseph Singal, “Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1984): 976-1004. It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to engage the historiographical debate

regarding the extent to which Hofstadter was actually committed to the consensus model.

²⁴ Hofstadter and Wallace, *American Violence*, 12.

²⁵ The reference here is to Clifford's assertion, "We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos . . . hybrid and heteroglot," in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 173. Again, I thank Harvey Neptune for constantly pushing this relation.

²⁶ On the notion of palimpsestic time, see M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). On the relation between Creoles and Indigenous populations in Guyana and the elaboration of the relation between labor and political rights, see Shona N. Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

²⁷ Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004), 147.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Obika Gray, *Demeaned but Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004); Obika Gray, *Radicalism and Social Change in Jamaica: 1960-1972* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

³² Gray 2004, *Demeaned but Empowered*, 99.

³³ Ibid., 99, 100.

³⁴ Ibid., 101.

³⁵ Ibid., 102, 131 (*italics in original*).

³⁶ Ibid., 100.

³⁷ Mike Melia, "Guns flood Jamaica from U.S., officials say," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 2009, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Guns-flood-jamaica-from-U-S-officials-say-3293911.php>, Accessed July 16, 2012; "Killings in Jamaica linked to guns from U.S," *Washington Times*, July 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/14/american-guns-used-in-killings/?page=all#pagebreak>, Accessed July 16, 2012; Sinclair, Glenroy, "Challenged By The Gun - Us Gun Industry Fuelling Jamaica's Murder Rate But More Assistance From The

FBI And ATF Could Be Coming,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, April 25, 2010, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100425/lead/lead5.html>, Accessed July 16, 2012.

³⁸ Melia, “Guns flood Jamaica from U.S.”

³⁹ The original Caribbean Basin Initiative began in 1984 under President Reagan during the Prime Ministership of Edward Seaga.

⁴⁰ Just the Facts, <http://justf.org/blog/2010/02/04/caribbean-basin-security-initiative-what-it>, Accessed June 10, 2010.

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion of how the “Labour Day War” is connected to a longer history of party politics in Jamaica, see Rupert Lewis, “Party Politics in Jamaica and the Extradition of Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke,” *Global South* 6, no. 1 (2012): 38-54.

⁴² Mattathias Schwartz, 2011, “A massacre in Jamaica,” *New Yorker*, December 12, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/12/12/111212fa_fact_schwartz, Accessed December 12, 2011.

⁴³ Mattathias Schwartz, “Jamaica’s former P.M. opens up about Coke arrest, extradition,” *New Yorker*, August 3, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/08/bruce-golding-opens-up-about-coke-arrest-extradition.html>, Accessed August 10, 2012.

⁴⁴ Richard Drayton, “From Kabul to Kingston: Army tactics in Jamaica resemble those used in Afghanistan – and it’s no mere coincidence,” *The Guardian*, 14 June 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/14/jamaica-tactics-army-afghanistan>, Accessed 14 June 2010.

⁴⁵ I thank Alissa Trotz for pointing me to these sources.

⁴⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.

⁴⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 168-9, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 94-95.

⁴⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 39.

⁵⁰ Eliga Gould, “Zones of Law, Zones of Violence: The Legal Geography of the British Atlantic, circa 1772,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 60, no. 3 (2003): 497, 474.

⁵¹ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 59.

⁵² Stephen Hornsby, *British Atlantic, American Frontier: Spaces of Power in Early Modern British America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005).

⁵³ Charles Wagley, "Plantation-America: A Culture Sphere," *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium*, ed. Vera Rubin (Mona: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University College of the West Indies, 1957), 3-13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁵ George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt, *Externally Propelled Industrialisation and Growth in the Caribbean: Selected Essays, Volumes I, II, III, and IV* (Montreal: McGill Center for Developing Area Studies, Unpublished Manuscript, 1969).

⁵⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Latin American and Caribbean Region of the World Bank, *Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean* (Washington DC, Report No. 37820, 2007).

⁵⁷ Sam Strangeways, "Bermuda's per capita homicide rate was more than five times London's rate in 2009," *Bermuda Royal Gazette*, February 8, 2010, <http://www.royalgazette.com/rg/Article/article.jsb?articleid=7da14ab3003000c§ionid=60>, Accessed February 8, 2010.

⁵⁸ Tara Abrahams-Clivio, "Let's renounce the title of murder capital," *Jamaica Observer*, October 20, 2005, http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/html/20051019t210000-0500_90690_obs_let_s_renounce_the_title_of_murder_capital.asp.