



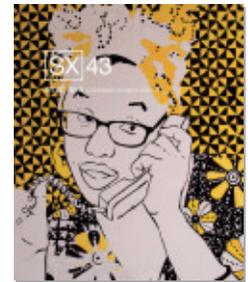
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Toward an Anthropology of the Caribbean State

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Toward an Anthropology of the Caribbean State

Rivke Jaffe

Deborah Thomas's *Exceptional Violence* is a broad-ranging, sophisticated book that intervenes in multiple debates. Its overarching aim is to develop a "reparations framework for thinking" that takes as its starting point the interlocking of temporalities, to understand more fully the role of the past in the present. Thomas develops this framework to provide a more nuanced analysis of Jamaica's "exceptional violence" than has until now been proffered, moving beyond culturalist, essentialist explanations to emphasize the implications of larger politicoeconomic and ideological structures over time. Such a "complexly cyclical engagement with history," Thomas argues, involves developing "a sustained conversation about history—and about the place of the past in the present—in terms other than those of righteous blame or liberal guilt."¹

In contrast to her earlier work, which had a stronger ethnographic basis, in *Exceptional Violence* Thomas draws on an interdisciplinary methodology in which ethnography shares the stage with approaches drawn from history, performance studies, and literary and cultural criticism. However, within the broader framework of reparations, Thomas does continue to develop lines of inquiry she pursued in her first book, *Modern Blackness*: she stresses the importance of attending to the interplay of local, national, and transnational geopolitical scales and demonstrates the necessity of an intersectional approach to inequality and injustice.² *Exceptional Violence* seeks to excavate the

1 Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 238; hereafter cited in the text.

2 Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

“particular forms of violence that are foundational to the development and deployment of ideologies regarding citizenship” (3). It sketches a historical lineage of definitions of political community by connecting these definitions to the physical and structural violence of colonialism and slavery. In so doing, the book also establishes more explicitly Thomas’s interest in citizenship and in how normative bases of national belonging are reproduced or transformed over time. This concern with citizenship is developed through an analysis of processes of state formation and the production of political subjects, reminding us of the centrality of violence as an organizing principle in these processes.

In this essay, I want to build on this attention to state formation, statecraft, and political community to tentatively explore how “the state” has featured in Caribbean studies and specifically what the role of Caribbeanist anthropologists has been and might be. I am interested in understanding to what extent there has been an anthropological engagement with the state and what form this engagement may have taken over time. Thomas herself, together with Karla Slocum, has been involved in a project that traces the development of anthropology in and on the region. This project includes asking “why specific questions engaged elsewhere in anthropology have not found their way firmly into Caribbeanist anthropology.”³ It is in this regard that I am interested in reflecting on the limited *direct* concern with the state that Caribbeanist anthropology as a whole has displayed historically.

Early political anthropology, emerging in the 1940s, was dominated by British structural functionalists who were interested in identifying and analyzing “primitive states” and chiefdoms, primarily in Africa. The specific development of anthropology in and on the Caribbean, however, did not include political anthropology as a sustained subfield. The absence of anthropologically constructed “primitives” in the Caribbean largely precluded the early type of political anthropology, with the partial exception, perhaps, of studies focused on the political systems of Maroon societies (not coincidentally those Caribbean research populations commonly framed as the most “African”).⁴ Moving beyond these earlier trends in political anthropology, when Caribbeanist anthropologists have been interested in the state, it has arguably been a contextual rather than a central focus of research. The state has figured primarily as an entity that has influence on Caribbean cultural institutions and practices characterized by adaptation, appropriation, and resistance—with these institutions and practices located firmly as the actual research focus. It very rarely features as the prime or explicit focus of anthropological attention, as becomes clear in Slocum and Thomas’s overview of analytical trajectories and theoretical developments in Caribbeanist anthropology, which I will touch on briefly here.⁵

3 Karla Slocum and Deborah A. Thomas, “Rethinking Global and Area Studies: Insights from Caribbeanist Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (2003): 561. See also Karla Slocum and Deborah A. Thomas, “Introduction: Locality in Today’s Global Caribbean; Shifting Economies of Nation, Race, and Development,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 14, nos. 1–2 (2007): 1–18; and Deborah A. Thomas and Karla Slocum, “Caribbean Studies, Anthropology, and US Academic Realignments,” *Souls* 10, no. 2 (2008): 123–37.

4 See, for example, Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1934), 196–97; Barbara K. Kopytoff, “The Maroons of Jamaica: An Ethnohistorical Study of Incomplete Politics, 1655–1905” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1973); and Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 20–23, 188.

5 The subsequent paragraph draws on Slocum and Thomas, “Rethinking Global and Area Studies.”

Following early anthropological research on peasant societies, folklorist themes, and family organization, an important post–World War II analytical focus was on social integration and disintegration in postcolonial societies. While the plural society debate that preoccupied these scholars did center on the feasibility of independent West Indian nation-states, cultural segmentation rather than statehood per se featured as the focus of research. Theoretical elaborations of creolization can also be seen as connected to this analytical strand. These studies have paid varying degrees of attention to issues of power, but they have allocated limited importance to the state, with research concentrating largely on cultural institutions and practices related to language, religion, music, and dance. The development of the creolization paradigm to a large extent overlapped with the emergence of a trajectory of Caribbeanist research that has been concerned with the interaction between colonialism, nationalism, and identity politics. This research has placed a strong emphasis on resistance and its continuity over time, linking resistance against slavery and colonialism to struggles against modern-day inequities. Here we see an increased focus on the state through attention to the cultural politics of postindependence nationalist projects—however, I would argue, the emphasis has been more strongly on the nation than on the state per se. Finally, Slocum and Thomas point to recent developments in the study of the intersections of the local and global in the context of the restructuring of global capitalism. Here, the nation-state has featured primarily as a rapidly retreating entity, one of decreasing relevance in the context of intensifying neoliberal globalization, migration, and transnationalism.

Beyond anthropology, the Caribbean state has featured more prominently in the research of political scientists and political philosophers. At the risk of presenting a gross oversimplification, two broad schools might be identified here as having been most influential within Caribbean studies, and specifically in relation to the anglophone Caribbean. First, there is a long tradition of black radical thought that has explored the entanglement of capitalism with colonialism, racism, and Eurocentrism.⁶ While this tradition has often shared Thomas' attentiveness to the possibilities of a transnational political community that goes beyond the nation-state, "the state" has arguably featured largely as a more or less reified entity. This more Marxist tradition has been complemented by a body of research taking a more explicitly Foucauldian perspective, locating power not so much in any sovereign state but rather focusing on colonial and postcolonial governmentality. Scholars drawing on this perspective have been interested in understanding the political rationalities of colonial and postcolonial rule, studying not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self, and unraveling the contradictions of liberal government in a context of colonialism and forced labor.⁷ Like the radical tradition, this governmentality approach has had limited interest in researching the everyday life of the state.

6 See the selection of articles in *Small Axe*, no. 40, for a critical discussion of the idea of this tradition.

7 Obviously much of this research has appeared in the pages of this journal. See, for example, Anthony Bogues, "Politics, Nation, and PostColony: Caribbean Inflections," *Small Axe*, no. 11 (March 2002): 1–30; and David Scott, "Political Rationalities of the Jamaican Modern," *Small Axe*, no. 14 (September 2003): 1–22. See also David Scott, "The Government of Freedom," in Brian Meeks and Folke Lindahl, eds., *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 428–50; and Beverly Mullings, "Governmentality, Diaspora Assemblages, and the Ongoing Challenge of 'Development,'" *Antipode* 44, no. 2 (2012): 406–27.

Drawing fruitfully on these various anthropological and philosophical trajectories, *Exceptional Violence* offers a brilliant analysis of the shifting parameters of political inclusion over time and across scales. Providing both detailed cases and a sense of their relation to these broader shifts, Thomas analyzes and critiques what we might define more precisely as citizenship *agendas*: normative framings of citizenship that prescribe what values, attitudes, and behavior are appropriate for those claiming membership in a political community.⁸ It is these questions she addresses when she asks, “Who has been included in the national body of Jamaica, and how has that changed from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century? How have threats to the body politic been imagined and eradicated? And how do those who have suffered as a result of their exclusion envision redress?” (174). As Thomas and other authors demonstrate, the prescription of relations between people and larger structures of rule and belonging—and the associated categorization of virtuous and deviant citizens—functions as a crucial governmental instrument through which populations are managed.⁹

A critical examination of such citizenship agendas is urgently necessary. However, I want to explore, in a very preliminary way, what a slightly different analytical lens might have produced in terms of thinking through Caribbean citizenship and the state. I would like to suggest that, in studies of the Caribbean, the state has always fallen just outside the line of anthropological vision.¹⁰ What new insights might be gained if we train our anthropological lens squarely on the state, on the ways it is imagined and encountered in everyday life? Despite the unpacking done by studies of governmentality, the state is still often presented as a thing, as “a more or less unified entity that can be the subject of actions such as deciding, ruling, punishing, regulating, intervening and waging war.”¹¹ Marxist approaches in particular have tended to present the state as a concrete, material unified entity that is the object of political struggle, and generally one that has been captured by elites.¹² For Caribbean studies, one such understanding of the state as an active, unified actor is perhaps found in Obika Gray’s concept of the “predatory state.”¹³

Might we make a more explicit move away from such reifying approaches to understand Caribbean states—and not only nations—as “constructed entities that are conceptualized and made socially effective through particular imaginative and symbolic devices”?¹⁴ Authors such as Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta understand the state as “produced through everyday practices and encounters and through public cultural representations and performances” and advocate

8 Anouk de Koning, Rivke Jaffe, and Martijn Koster, “Citizenship Agendas in and beyond the Nation-State: (En)Countering Framings of the Good Citizen,” *Citizenship Studies*, forthcoming.

9 See Davina Bhandar, “Cultural Politics: Disciplining Citizenship,” *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 3 (2010): 331–43; and Katharyne Mitchell, “Neoliberal Governmentality in the European Union: Education, Training, and Technologies of Citizenship,” *Environment and Planning D* 24, no. 3 (2006): 389–407.

10 To some extent, studies of Haiti have formed an exception. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); and, more recently, Chelsey L. Kivland, “Unmaking the State in ‘Occupied’ Haiti,” *PoLAR* 35, no. 2 (2012): 248–70.

11 Joe Painter, “Prosaic Geographies of Stateness,” *Political Geography* 25, no. 7 (2006): 754.

12 See Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1977; repr. 1988): 58–89.

13 Obika Gray, “Predation Politics and the Political Impasse in Jamaica,” *Small Axe*, no. 13 (March 2003): 72–94.

14 James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, “Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality,” *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 981.

attention to “how states are culturally constituted, how they are substantiated in people’s lives, and . . . the sociopolitical and everyday consequences of these constructions.”¹⁵ They propose a two-pronged anthropological approach to the state that focuses ethnographically on the interactions with mundane practices of state agencies and agents, as well as on the representational effects through which these varied and often contradictory practices become associated with an autonomous, vertically encompassing governmental entity.

Such an approach that starts from the everyday might, for instance, go further in ethnographically unpacking and contextualizing citizenship agendas. *Exceptional Violence* does a fine job of showing the various ways Jamaicans suffer from normative framings of citizenship, sometimes resisting them, sometimes reproducing them. Thomas gives a detailed analysis, for instance, of the policies and discourse through which young black men have been positioned as inherently violent and black family structure as dysfunctional. She shows how lower-class men and women are complicit in the transnational reproduction of a colonially rooted sexual policing, and she outlines the various Rastafari responses to their historically violent exclusion from the body politic. The interdisciplinary approach Thomas takes in the book facilitates an analysis of impressive historical scope and thematic breadth.

I would have been interested, however, to see explored in more detail how and by whom citizenship agendas are set over time—who are the governmental “programmers” implicated in the state engineering of subjects? The anonymity of power in Foucauldian approaches sometimes risks obscuring personal agency; the populations being governed may unintentionally end up figuring largely as “docile bodies,” passive if occasionally resistive, while there is less sense of their generative potential as *thinking* subjects. I was left wondering to what extent lower-class, darker-skinned Jamaicans were able to go beyond a more reactive position in relationship to these agendas. Are they also active in setting agendas, in independently generating parameters of inclusion, outside of or prior to state efforts? And moving beyond citizenship agendas, how does the idea of “the state” take shape in everyday life? How is “the state” constituted in citizens’ recognition of authority and making of claims? A focus on everyday practices, encounters, and representations might bring a slightly different perspective to our understandings of citizenship.

What type of insights might such a focus produce for Jamaica? More attention to agency might highlight the possibility of significant shifts—in addition to continuity—in political order over the centuries. It might point toward the role of “regular folk” as producers of normative frames that become official citizenship agendas. For instance, when former prime minister P. J. Patterson claimed as his political legacy the fact that *man have nuff gyal*, this might be taken as the official adoption of popular sexual norms rather than vice versa. In addition, approaching citizenship “from the ground up” might encourage us to study more closely the plurality of governmental actors, beyond those commonly associated with “the state.” The political communities to which Jamaicans claim membership are not only state-based. Thomas suggests a move in this direction herself in

15 Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, “Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization,” in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, eds., *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 27.

her definition of *citizenship* as “a set of performances and practices directed at various state and non-state institutions or extraterritorial or extralegal networks—networks that are global, national, regional and local.” She goes on to suggest, “We tease out the various ways in which the regulatory, disciplinary, biopolitical, and distributional practices of governments throughout the Americas (and beyond) have often been suffused with and enacted by extra-state, non-state, or quasi-legal entities” (6). These tantalizing statements are not, however, sufficiently elaborated empirically in the chapters that follow.

In recent years, so-called criminal dons have perhaps been the most salient group of “extra-state” governmental actors. These dons do not so much compete with “the Jamaican state” as form part of a larger governmental assemblage that goes beyond bureaucracies and democratic politics to include organized crime. While dons are mentioned in a number of instances throughout *Exceptional Violence*, I am interested here not so much in their role in national and transnational circuits of violence (chapter 1) or their utilization of spectacular violence as a form of discipline (chapter 3). Rather, I am interested in thinking through their centrality in the ways political belonging, including to “the state,” is experienced and shaped in everyday life.

First, the phenomenon of donmanship underscores the fact that the exercise of power, and the form in which it is encountered, is not necessarily anonymous. Dons have played a critical role in the reconfiguration of citizenship, and perhaps we might understand some of them (such as Jim Brown, Dudus, or Zeeks, whose rule has been particularly influential and prolonged) not so much as sovereigns but as individual “programmers” who have actively sought to engineer new political subjects through disciplinary and governmental schemata. They draw on spontaneous as well as sponsored popular culture practices (including street dances, dancehall music, and visual culture) that contribute to the aesthetic fashioning of don-directed political subjectivities. This engineering of subjects also involves regulating the behavior of those who live in the territories they control, for instance, through jurisdictional practices known as “splitting justice,” with punishment for transgressions such as theft, and including not only physical violence but also spatial measures, such as temporary imprisonment or banishment from the neighborhood. Certain dons set rules aimed specifically at children, such as curfews (e.g., children under the age of twelve must be off the streets by 8:00 p.m., those under fifteen may stay out until 10:00 p.m.) or a prohibition on smoking until age fifteen. In addition, their regulation of the circulation of information, through tenets such as *informer fi dead*, has rendered certain things unspeakable and produced self-censoring subjects. In this sense, might we see them as having actively set citizenship agendas rather than merely reproducing or resisting state agendas? And, given that the antigang legislation recently tabled in parliament bans the “use of signs, symbols, graffiti, or songs to promote or facilitate the criminal activities of a criminal organization,” we might even see politicians as the ones reacting to dons’ citizenship agendas.¹⁶

16 Criminal Justice (Suppression of Criminal Organisations) Act 2013, quoted in Edmond Campbell, “Gangster Lyrics Could Land Artistes in Jail: Measure among Far-Reaching Provisions in Proposed Anti-gang Law,” *Gleaner*, 26 June 2013, online edition, para. 2, jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20130626/lead/lead4.html. In addition, the police have begun a campaign of smashing or painting over murals depicting dons. See Anastasia Cunningham, “Taking Back Our Communities . . . with Paint,” *Gleaner*, 3 March 2013, online edition, jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20130303/lead/lead4.html.

In addition, dons did not become influential governmental actors only because politicians granted them access to weapons and money. The constitution of their power also lies in the fact that they function as a mirror onto which the hopes and aspirations of many inner-city residents have been projected, as emblems of a particular type of political community that is distinct from the dominant regime of socioeconomically and racially differentiated citizenship. Two of the main characteristics attributed to Dudus were his equal treatment of his subjects and his effective maintenance of order. While these representations were no doubt overstated, they evidence the hopes projected on these leaders as well as the weight placed on impartiality, equality, and strong-arm efficacy. Similar hopes and values can be recognized in the claims inner-city residents make on the formal state during mediated street protests. The urban poor narrate and perform relationships of mutual obligation vis-à-vis a range of governmental agents including bureaucrats, politicians, and dons. In residents' everyday encounters with, and in their imaginations and representations of, donmanship and the state, can we recognize the negotiation, rather than the top-down imposition, of relations of citizenship?

Finally, studying the ways political community takes shape in everyday life might draw our attention to the boundaries of the state rather than to those of the body politic. For instance, it might show that for inner-city residents the distinction between *state* and *society*, between *public* and *private*, is quite flexible. In my own fieldwork in downtown Kingston, in the context of research on donmanship, I have been struck by the inseparability of dons and politicians, not only in their governmental practices but also in how residents represented and related to "the state." The entanglement of these governmental agents has become almost intrinsic to imaginations of the state. When Jamaica Labour Party supporters shout "Shower!" during electoral campaigning, using the Shower Posse reference to indicate support for their political party, they produce and reproduce a blurred distinction between "state" and "nonstate," between political and criminal leaders. Similarly, in May 2010 hundreds of West Kingston residents marched out peacefully toward Gordon House to protest the government's decision to extradite Dudus: this demonstration targeted the democratically elected parliament, to defend a leader whose authority was rooted in various sources but not in democracy. In so doing this political rally recognized and reinforced these two types of authority simultaneously. Through such entangled political subjectivities, "the state" becomes a variable, shape-shifting entity rather than a realm that is clearly demarcated from "society" or "criminals."

With *Exceptional Violence*, Thomas builds on and extends the study of rule and belonging in Caribbean studies, unpacking various forms of statecraft. While her work gives a new impulse to the study of citizenship in the transnational Caribbean, I suggest that it might be similar to much of Caribbeanist anthropology in paying limited attention to the everyday life of the state. Such attention might shift our analysis toward an understanding of both citizenship and the state as sites of negotiation and coconstruction. Ever mindful of the highly uneven power relations that frame such negotiations, such an anthropology would also take more explicitly into account the active role played by governed populations in imagining, representing, and enacting their relationships with governmental actors and assemblages. If twenty-first-century inner-city residents recognize various forms of political authority, perhaps this is not so different from earlier moments in Jamaican

history. The Baptist War, the Morant Bay Rebellion, and the labor revolts of the 1930s all reflected and reinforced political subjectivities formed through the practices and representations of specific insurgent movements, religious denominations, trade unions, planters, and the colonial state. Attending to the multiple languages through which authority not only speaks but is heard, and the mutual imbrication of these languages, would fit neatly within Thomas's reparations framework.