



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Introduction: Representing Crime, Violence and Jamaica

Evans, L.; Jaffe, R.

DOI

[10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659162](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659162)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Interventions

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Evans, L., & Jaffe, R. (2020). Introduction: Representing Crime, Violence and Jamaica. *Interventions*, 22(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659162>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

INTRODUCTION: REPRESENTING CRIME, VIOLENCE AND JAMAICA

Lucy Evans^a and Rivke Jaffe^b

^aSchool of Arts, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; ^bDepartment of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

The transformation of politically affiliated Jamaican gangs into transnational criminal organizations in the 1980s generated media reports that criminalized black masculinity and associated Jamaica and the Jamaican diaspora in Europe and North America with a “culture of violence” (Scott 1997; Thomas 2011). This has continued into the twenty-first century with, for example, the media coverage of the Tivoli Gardens don and Shower Posse leader Christopher “Dudus” Coke’s arrest and extradition in 2010. Representations of “yardies” in film, popular music, fiction and investigative non-fiction have similarly often reinforced cultural, racial and sexual stereotypes (Murji 2009). These kinds of popular and media narratives of crime and violence in Jamaica and the Jamaican diaspora have perpetuated what Paul Gilroy calls the myth of black criminality (1987, 118) and reinforced “imaginative geographies”, rooted in colonial perspectives, that “depict Jamaica as a lawless, criminogenic space” (Jaffe 2014, 159). In this special issue of *Interventions* we consider how representations of various kinds may reconfigure widespread associations of Jamaica with crime and violence. While these representations can contribute to the reproduction of stereotypical associations,

they can also challenge dominant understandings by questioning and complicating assumptions around national and cultural identity, race, class, gender and sexuality, and by reframing the contexts and causes of crime in Jamaica and in the Jamaican diaspora. The essays collected here cover a wide range of representational forms and modes, including fiction, biography, film, photography, oral history, popular music, painting and street art.

As is indicated in its title, “Representing Crime, Violence and Jamaica”, this special issue seeks to problematize the bracketing of “crime” and “violence” with “Jamaica” and “Jamaican”. The concepts of “Jamaican crime” and “crime in Jamaica” need to be interrogated for two reasons: firstly, the causes and effects of crime committed in Jamaica – particularly organized crime – extend beyond the country’s borders; and secondly, crime committed by Jamaicans abroad is not necessarily either rooted in Jamaica or explained by specifically Jamaican characteristics. Similarly, the special issue destabilizes dominant readings of Jamaica in terms of “violent crime”. It highlights, for instance, those forms of violence that are not formally illegal, such as certain forms of state violence and the structural violence of racialised and gendered inequality. In addition, it includes a focus on crimes that are less evidently violent, such as financial fraud and corruption.

Deborah Thomas critiques the essentialism of perspectives that present violence as “a primordial aspect of Jamaican culture” (2011, 55), perspectives that are applied both to Jamaica and to members of the Jamaican diaspora in Europe and North America. She draws attention to how in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, “bloggers, editorialists, and policymakers, by positioning violence as external to the process of state formation, all reproduce the notion that violence is a cultural rather than a structural phenomenon” (79). They therefore explain violence in these countries by attaching it to “‘deviant’ immigrant groups” (79), rather than recognizing it as integral to the ongoing process of state formation. Building on the work of both Thomas and David Scott, we make a case here for the potential of creative expression to challenge the “culture of violence fallacy” (Scott 1997, 142). The literary, visual, cinematic and popular texts that are the focus of this special issue position crime and violence within a transnational frame; they also draw attention to structural and state violence, in addition to the violent activities of criminal organizations; and they complicate prevailing understandings of legality and legitimacy.

A major focus of scholarship on crime and violence in Jamaica has been gangs and organized crime (Rapley 2006; Harriott 2008; Johnson and Soeters 2008). To some extent this reflects a broader pattern within criminology, which has traditionally concentrated on street crime – including gang-related crime – and has begun to engage only relatively recently with areas such as state crime, state-corporate crime, and white collar crime (Michalowski, Chambliss, and Kramer 2014, 2; Rothe et al. 2009, 4). As a

major component in Jamaica's rising levels of violent crime since the turn of the millennium (Leslie 2010; UNDP 2012), and one of the most pressing concerns of the Jamaican government, organized crime is certainly an area in need of scholarly attention. It is therefore a key concern in this special issue; all seven contributions examine, in different ways, representations of gangs and organized crime. Yet the forms of crime and violence considered in the essays also extend beyond this, perhaps inevitably, given the imbrication of organized crime with the interests of Jamaican state actors – in what Jaffe (2013) has described as a “hybrid state” – and the historical role of foreign powers in fomenting these relations. Alongside organized crime, the essays included here by Deborah Thomas and Tracian Meikle, and Rivke Jaffe's interview with artist Michael Elliott, deal with state violence; Michael Bucknor's essay addresses sexual and gender-based violence; and those by Emiel Martens, Lucy Evans and Kim Robinson-Walcott highlight the structural violence associated with colonial and neoliberal power dynamics.

Research on organized crime demonstrates how its increasingly transnational dimensions, in an era of globalization, have generated a need for the term to be reconceptualised (Madsen 2009, 12). This has led to a redefinition of organized crime as “transnational organised crime”, a growing field of criminological research (Albanese and Reichel 2013; Allum and Gilmour 2015). Amanda Sives positions her discussion of crime and politics in twenty-first-century Jamaica in the context of the “rapid expansion of transnational crime ... facilitated by financial deregulation and the free movement of capital under globalisation” (2012, 424). She draws attention to the simultaneously local, national and global dimensions of Jamaican criminal organizations which operate transnationally but are also “connected to elements of the state” and have “links with the political elements at the community level” (424). The essays collected here emphasize both the transnational scope and the local complexities of crime and violence in Jamaica and the Jamaican diaspora. Michael Bucknor's analysis of Garfield Ellis's 2010 novel *Till I'm Laid to Rest* traces the spatial imaginaries and affective geographies of organized crime beyond Kingston to Miami, while Deborah Thomas's multi-modal ethnographic project, discussed in her essay, juxtaposes Tivoli Gardens residents' accounts of the 2010 State of Emergency in Kingston with national and international media images and US drone footage. Lucy Evans' essay on Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), a novel set in Kingston, New York and Miami in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, similarly considers multi-scalar understandings of crime and violence.

A prominent concern in this special issue is the figure of the gangster or criminal leader. The contributors critically examine representations of the Jamaican rudie, shotta, don and yardie figures in media discourse and in popular culture, while at the same time exploring fictional, biographical, visual and cinematic texts that rethink this figure. Meikle's photo-essay and

Jaffe’s interview with Elliott explore the ambivalence of Jamaican dons as both “drug kingpins” (Agozino 2009, 296) and informal community leaders. Both Meikle’s emphasis on the “multivalency” of inner-city murals celebrating dons and Elliott’s construction of Dudus from playdough in his *Donopoly* series illuminate the plasticity of the don figure – a character who not only eludes the police but also resists a fixed and stable identity. The malleability of the don as cultural icon is addressed in a different way in Bucknor’s and Evans’ essays. Focusing on two recent Jamaican novels, their essays explore how literary fiction remodels the gangster figure through an emphasis on affect, emotion and intimacy (in Ellis’s *Till I’m Laid to Rest*), and through an engagement with complex and shifting discourses of masculinity (in James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings*). While Robinson-Walcott’s essay looks at how popular works of fiction and biography frame the don as a legitimate figure of resistance, linking this to longer genealogies of resistance against colonialism, Bucknor reads Ellis’s work as humanizing Jamaica’s transnational criminal subjects. All three essays engage explicitly with the gendered and sexual politics of the gangster and the don, demonstrating how different forms of creative expression may reproduce or complicate dominant framings of African-Caribbean masculinity as hypersexual or heteronormative.

Academic debate on crime and violence in Jamaica has taken place predominantly within the social sciences. There has been limited focus on the question of representation, although the work of anthropologists and cultural studies researchers on depictions of crime and violence in popular culture is beginning to enter this debate (Thomas 2011, 2016; Jaffe 2012; Cooper 2004; Hope 2006; Stanley Niaah 2010). The contributors to this special issue connect scholarly, media and popular discourses on crime, violence and Jamaica with creative expressions of various kinds. The essays also illuminate the ways in which different modes of representation intersect and engage with each other, blurring the boundaries between them. For example, Martens’ essay on urban crime films explores this genre’s symbiotic connection with the musical genres of reggae and dancehall; Evans looks at the close intertextual dialogue with both music and film in Marlon James’ fiction; and Robinson-Walcott analyses a work of non-fiction published by a celebrated dancehall artist. Equally, Elliott explains how his visual art takes inspiration from news media, and Thomas comments on the making of a film and installation that combine photography, video and oral histories with media images and drone footage. By reading across a range of media, forms and genres, the special issue juxtaposes differing perspectives and modalities, and in doing so aims to “disturb the normative frames through which crime and violence have been represented” (Thomas in this special issue). The essays consider how literary, visual and popular modes of expression can help us imagine legality and legitimacy *otherwise*, prompting us to question and

reconfigure problematic associations of “crime” and “violence” with specific places and people, and to reconsider some of the assumptions underlying dominant forms of crime control policy.

The symbolic and discursive power of aesthetic practices can be seen in the Jamaica Constabulary Force’s anti-mural campaign, discussed in Meikle’s photo-essay, which has involved the painting out of murals depicting dons. This literal erasure of creative expression in Kingston’s inner-city neighbourhoods illustrates a clash between competing narratives of the city and nation – a key theme of this special issue. Martens’ contribution explores how urban crime films have generated “contrasting ‘articulations and mythologies’ of downtown Kingston” which challenge the paradise island discourse disseminated through the global mass media and tourism industry. Thomas’s essay makes a case for the function of narrative and visual texts not only as a source of alternative perspectives on a place already saturated with sensationalist media images, but also as a form of testimony, and a way of bearing witness to state violence. Similarly, Meikle’s analysis of memorial murals draws out the complexity of the work they perform, as part of processes of commemoration and celebration, but also mourning and grief. In both cases, visual texts produced within and for inner-city communities foreground the individual identities, lived experiences, humanity and dignity of people who have been demonized or reduced to statistics in the news media.

This special issue is a product of a workshop that took place at the Institute of Criminal Justice and Security, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, in June 2017, the launch event for the international research networking project “Dons, Yardies and Posses: Representations of Jamaican Organised Crime” (2017–19), funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council and led by Lucy Evans (University of Leicester, UK) and Rivke Jaffe (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands). All of the special issue contributors have been active network participants. Bringing together researchers and creative practitioners from the Caribbean, Europe and North America, this networking project has focused on depictions of crime, violence and Jamaica(ns) in literary writing, visual art, popular music, film and the media, and considered the relationship of these representations to public policy and debates in the social sciences. There is an unmistakable paradox in receiving British research funding for a project (and with a title) tied so directly to the problematic associations it also sought to critique. In the same year, the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust funded two other research networks focusing on crime and security in the Anglophone Caribbean, led by Lucy Evans and Pat Noxolo, respectively. It is not unlikely that, in addition to intellectual and societal urgency, the same naturalized connections between crime and the Caribbean region that this special issue critiques played a role in this funding success. Academic knowledge production remains in many ways shaped by logistic and financial

infrastructures rooted in colonialism, and it remains incumbent on us to consider how all aspects of our research – from funding applications to writing projects – might seek to escape reproducing this.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the AHRC for funding the research network which led to the creation of this special issue. We would also like to thank all of the network participants for stimulating presentations and discussions at the project events.

Funding

This work was supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

References

- Agozino, Biko. 2009. Ben Bowling, Elizabeth Ward, and Godfrey Sheptycki St Bernard. 2009. 'Guns, Crime and Social Order in the West Indies.' *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 9 (3): 287–305.
- Albanese, Jay, and Philip Reichel, eds. 2013. *Transnational Organized Crime: An Overview from Six Continents*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Allum, Felia, and Stan Gilmour, eds. 2015. *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, Carolyn. 2004. *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1987. "The Myth of Black Criminality." In *Law, Order and the Authoritarian State*, edited by Phil Scraton, 107–120. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Harriott, Anthony. 2008. *Organized Crime and Politics in Jamaica: Breaking the Nexus*. Kingston: University of West Indies Press.
- Hope, Donna. 2006. "Dons and Shottas: Performing Violent Masculinity in Dancehall Culture." *Social and Economic Studies* 55 (1–2): 115–131.
- Jaffe, Rivke. 2012. "The Popular Culture of Illegality: Crime and the Politics of Aesthetics in Urban Jamaica." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85 (1): 79–102.
- Jaffe, Rivke. 2013. "The Hybrid State: Crime and Citizenship in Urban Jamaica." *American Ethnologist* 40 (4): 734–748.
- Jaffe, Rivke. 2014. "Crime Watch: Mediating Belonging and the Politics of Place in Inner-City Jamaica." In *Stories of Cosmopolitan Belonging: Emotion and Location*, edited by Hannah Jones and Emma Jackson, 159–169. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, Hume N., and Joseph L. Soeters. 2008. "Jamaican Dons, Italian Godfathers and the Chances of a 'Reversible Destiny'." *Political Studies* 56 (1): 166–191.
- Leslie, Glaister. 2010. *Confronting the Don: The Political Economy of Gang Violence in Jamaica*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.
- Madsen, Frank G. 2009. *Transnational Organized Crime*. London: Routledge.
- Michalowski, Raymond, William J. Chambliss, and Ronald C. Kramer. 2014. "Introduction." In *State Crime in the Global Age*, edited by William J. Chambliss, Raymond Michalowski, and Ronald Kramer, 1–9. London: Routledge.
- Murji, Karim. 2009. "Wild Life: Constructions and Representations of Yardies." In *Making Trouble: Cultural Constructions of Crime, Deviance and*

- Control*, edited by Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale, 179–201. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Rapley, John. 2006. “The New Middle Ages.” *Foreign Affairs* 85 (3): 95–103.
- Rothe, Dawn L., Jeffrey Ian Ross, Christopher W. Mullins, David Friedrichs, Raymond Michalowski, Gregg Barak, David Kauzlarich, and Ronald C. Kramer. 2009. “That was Then, This is Now, What about Tomorrow? Future Directions in State Crime Studies.” *Critical Criminology* 17 (3): 3–13.
- Scott, David. 1997. “The ‘Culture of Violence’ Fallacy.” *Small Axe* 2: 140–147.
- Sives, Amanda. 2012. “A Calculated Assault on the Authority of the State? Crime, Politics and Extradition in 21st Century Jamaica.” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 58 (4): 415–435.
- Stanley Niaah, Sonjah. 2010. *Dancehall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Thomas, Deborah A. 2011. *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Deborah A. 2016. “Time and the Otherwise: Plantations, Garrisons and Being Human in the Caribbean.” *Anthropological Theory* 16 (2–3): 177–200.
- UNDP. 2012. *Caribbean Human Development Report 2012: Human Development and the Shift to Better Citizen Security*. New York: UNDP. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/HDR/Latin%20America%20and%20Caribbean%20HDR/C_bean_HDR_Jan25_2012_3MB.pdf.