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Writing around violence: Representing organized crime in Kingston, Jamaica

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eth**Rivke Jaffe**

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Abstract

Ethnographies of Latin American and Caribbean gangs tend to emphasize the violent practices of these social groups. My own research in Kingston, Jamaica, on criminal leaders known as ‘dons’, analyzed their entanglement with the Jamaican state and studied how their relations with inner-city residents resemble citizenship relations. While dons are undoubtedly directly associated with Jamaica’s high homicide levels, they also provide social welfare and public order, and my work has focused principally on this relatively non-violent side of donmanship. In this article, I reflect on the factors underlying this particular representational emphasis, which has sometimes led to accusations of my ‘romanticizing the dons’. Assessing these various factors, the article considers whether it is ethically justifiable and epistemologically sound to produce ethnographies of violent actors without dwelling in detail on their acts of violence. Given the skew in studies of criminal organizations, and of inner-city life, toward extensive description of and analytical attention to violence, I propose that producing ethnographic narratives that decenter it is in fact justifiable. In addition, studying criminal organizations through less common frameworks can open new avenues of exploration that may be obscured if we continue to satisfy popular and academic expectations of the centrality of violence.

Keywords

representation, organized crime, violence, ghetto ethnographies, ethics, epistemology, Jamaica

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Introduction

It is not often that ethnographers get to read novels that engage directly with their research sites and topics. For me, this was the case with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), the Man Booker Prize winning novel by the Jamaican author Marlon James. The book resonated directly with research I had done in the island's capital of Kingston on the history and continued influence of criminal organizations, and reading it was an exciting, but also acutely uncomfortable, experience. At nearly 700 pages, the novel is hardly a brief history, and it chronicles far more than seven killings, often in gory detail. Moving from the 1970s to the 1990s and between Jamaica and the United States, the book is a fictional account of Jamaica's transnational drugs trade. It is clearly presented as fiction – it claims to be neither ethnographic scholarship, nor a journalistic or academic historical account. Yet its clear focus on violence, and the way it represents violent acts and actors, raise ethical and political questions that are of direct relevance to ethnographers who work in conflict- and crime-affected areas such as the urban Caribbean. It also focuses our attention on the sometimes blurred line between fiction and ethnographic fact.

A Brief History of Seven Killings traces the historical development of gangs that emerged from the 'ghettos' of Downtown Kingston, their violent battles over electoral turf in a clientelist system known as 'garrison politics' promoted by Jamaica's two main political parties, the role of US intelligence agencies during the Cold War era in fostering their growth, and their reach into inner-city neighborhoods in North American cities. James tells this story in a polyphonic fashion, through the voices of multiple, predominantly male narrators – a dead politician, criminal leaders known as 'dons', gang members, an American journalist, a CIA operative – who are all connected in one way or another to an infamous moment in Jamaican political and musical history: the December 1976 attempt on the life of Bob Marley.

Part of my discomfort reading James's novel stemmed from the fact that it is a thinly veiled *roman à clef*. The book includes fictional characters who do not appear to be based directly on actually existing historical or contemporary characters, but many others are obviously taken from real life. Readers with some knowledge of Jamaican history will have no trouble in identifying the real-life counterparts of the superficially fictionalized characters, some of whom are still alive and continue to have varying levels of influence in Jamaica's political and criminal scene.¹ I realized that it made me nervous to see a writer pointing fingers so clearly at specific individuals and organizations, implicating them not only in the Marley attack but also in various other acts of torture and murder, and in sexual exploits that many in Jamaica consider taboo. Could one write like this and get away with it? Even though James lived in the United States, would he be safe there, and could he still travel to Jamaica?²

I was also disturbed in a different way, by the book's many gruesome, detailed descriptions of violence, and with how James represented Jamaica, and

particularly Kingston's inner-city neighborhoods and the people who live there. Both Jamaica and these neighborhoods are characterized by high levels of violent crime – this is no secret, although the tourism board might prefer it to be otherwise. Yet, even if violence may not sell many vacations, its representation and aestheticization do have another type of commercial appeal, especially when they take on more sensationalist forms. Popular music, films and novels that focus on violence have proven to attract large audiences, and combining scenes of brutal violence with a storyline featuring a reggae superstar can be commercially advantageous.³ Moreover, cultural narratives of violence like *A Brief History of Seven Killings* that elaborate the causes of that same violence work as explanatory and normative frames that are used to either legitimize or stigmatize specific persons, places, policies and behaviors. While James does elaborate the complex history of Jamaican transnational crime, with its multi-scalar and geopolitical drivers, his depictions of inner-city violence arguably tend towards a reliance on culturalist frameworks.⁴

For ethnographers working on Jamaica, the success of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* – now a global pop reference point for urban Jamaica – makes it imperative to consider the work that representations of violence *do*. Both ethnographic and literary representations of violence may risk provoking real-world violence. But when they become, or directly reproduce, a dominant, potentially harmful way of knowing people and places, might these representations themselves also be understood as a form of epistemic violence? It is not my intention here to present an elaborate critique of James's novel, which is in many ways an admirable literary achievement. Instead, I draw on the feelings of discomfort it elicited while I read it, in order to reflect on my own approach to writing about violence in Kingston. Or rather, I reflect on why I ended up *not* writing about it in detail, although much of my ethnographic work has taken in place in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods in Downtown Kingston and I spent six years researching the role of criminal organizations in these areas.

Ethnographies of Latin American and Caribbean gangs tend to emphasize the violent practices of these social groups (see Jones and Rodgers, 2009). In my own research on criminal leaders known as 'dons', I approached these leaders and their organizations as governance actors, analyzing their entanglement with the Jamaican state and studying how their relations with inner-city residents resemble citizenship relations. While dons are associated directly with Jamaica's high homicide levels, my approach involved a stronger emphasis on the aspects of donmanship in which violence featured less prominently. My work considered, for instance, the aesthetic underpinnings of their authority (Jaffe, 2012a) and highlighted their role in providing social welfare and public order (Jaffe, 2012b, 2013).

In what follows, I reflect on the factors that might have driven this emphasis in representation, which has sometimes led to accusations of my 'romanticizing the dons'. In part, this reflects the fact that, during my fieldwork, I did not observe many violent incidents, nor did stories of violence dominate in the interviews and informal conversations I held with residents. Beyond this relatively low exposure to

violence – which may, of course, have been shaped by my reluctance to look for it, or ask after it explicitly – I explore whether my tendency to write ‘around’ the violence associated with dons might in part be a form of self-censorship, in reaction to implicit pressure from local leadership. In addition, I have also chosen to concentrate on non-violent practices in an attempt to counter more sensationalist, culturally essentialist accounts of bloodthirsty Jamaican ‘posses’ and morally deviant inner-city residents. Finally, I suggest that focusing on other processes, events and narratives than violent ones may also have functioned as a psychological coping strategy that enabled me to do research in violent circumstances. Assessing these various factors, I consider whether it is ethically justifiable and epistemologically sound to produce ethnographies of violent actors without dwelling in detail on their acts of violence. Given the centrality of violence in studies of criminal organizations, and of inner-city life, in Jamaica and beyond, I propose that producing ethnographic narratives that decenter it is not only justifiable, but can enable new analytical perspectives that a primary focus on violence might preclude.

On not seeing violence

During the period 2008–12, I spent 12 months researching donmanship, focusing on a neighborhood in Downtown Kingston that I refer to as Brick Town, an area formerly ruled by an influential don whom I gave the pseudonym of The General. Participant observation in Brick Town mainly involved a lot of ‘deep hanging out’: eating and drinking at neighborhood cook shops, watching television and DVDs with residents, sitting on street corners chatting and watching passersby, shopping at the local market, and occasionally attending festive events such as street dances. In addition to this neighborhood-based research, I organized a survey in multiple inner-city areas, and interviewed a broad range of actors throughout the city, including politicians, bureaucrats, police officers, businessmen, NGO workers, and a number of smaller dons and their seconds-in-command, some of them retired.

As noted above, violence did not necessarily present itself as a dominant theme within my fieldwork. Violence and crime were significant background features of life in Brick Town, but they were not the only or the dominant theme, and residents did not appear to go about their daily lives in a state of fear. Dons and seconds-in-command I interviewed did not deny the need to use violence in maintaining their rule, although they were quick to emphasize that the threat of violence, or a reputation of historical involvement in violence, could in itself be sufficient. Similarly, Brick Town residents did not restrict their discussions to dons’ non-violent activities, which included providing local access to a range of public goods and services, from welfare and employment to solid waste management and the construction of public parks (see Jaffe, 2013).⁵ They also confirmed the dons’ use of violence, although they tended to justify its use as necessary to maintain local peace and order (see Jaffe, 2012b, 2015; Charles and Beckford, 2012). With respect to crime more broadly, many of my interlocutors turned out to have been deported from foreign countries after having been involved in ‘a little

drugs business', or had spent time in prisons in Jamaica, but other residents generally did not treat them as scary, violent individuals.

During the first few years of my research, Brick Town was relatively calm. I had gained access through one of the General's relatives, and following some initial awkwardness I struck up a number of fieldwork friendships and felt increasingly comfortable showing up unannounced. As during my previous research, in other Downtown neighborhoods, on urban pollution (Jaffe, 2016), the appearance of a white-identified female researcher often elicited surprise, but only very rarely generated any hostile or otherwise negative responses – my 'foreign' appearance generally seemed to help rather than hinder access. The fact that Brick Town was not involved in any active gang feuds, and remained calm in the run-up to the 2011 national elections, contributed to my feelings of safety.

Even when, starting in 2012, an escalating conflict between two factions competing over leadership within Brick Town led to multiple murders, I still felt relatively comfortable visiting. The murders generally took place at night; I experienced the daytime 'vibes' in the market area of the neighborhood where I spent most of my time as more or less unchanged; and I did not feel that I would be a target. As in other inner-city neighborhoods where I had worked, many people went out of their way to make me feel comfortable, escorting me to the border of Brick Town if I was leaving on foot, or to my car if I was driving, especially at times when things were 'running hot'. The fact that residents seemed to carry on with their everyday activities, seemingly without feeling too much fear, also helped.

Throughout the years that I visited, residents would sometimes discuss historical or recent incidents of gang-related violence or police brutality amongst each other, and in interviews with me, but it was not a dominant theme. In my interviews outside the neighborhood, the violent actions of dons also featured from time to time, but our discussions of these criminal leaders concentrated mainly on their role in providing public services in the neighborhoods where they ruled, as well as their various connections to formal state actors and the corporate sector – a focus due in part to my inclusion of questions on these topics.

In retrospect, part of me wondered whether I was a bad ethnographer. How was it possible for me to work in Brick Town and other inner-city areas – all notoriously dangerous neighborhoods, known island-wide for their homicide rates – and *not* observe everyday violence? Was I insensitive or blind to what was going on, or were my relationships with residents so superficial that no one would tell me what was really going on? In short, was my 'romanticization' due to ignorance? I believe I have sufficient reason to conclude that this has not been the case, in part due to the nature of violence in Downtown Kingston and in part because triangulation supports my experiences.

While violence does occur in neighborhoods like Brick Town, its specific temporality limits its visibility to both researchers and residents.⁶ First of all, shoot-outs and murders almost always happen in the middle of the night, when most residents are indoors and asleep. Even when these attacks occur in the daytime, these are usually extremely brief, targeted episodes of violence that last seconds.

In addition, the violence between gangs tends to occur in 'flare-ups' and a don-led neighborhood may pass long periods of time without incident. This means that researchers who spend long periods of time in an area, and even residents themselves, may rarely witness gunfire first-hand. During such flare-ups, residents will discuss the 'war', analyzing its causes and the risks involved, but in times of 'peace', violence need not be a frequent conversation topic.

Of course, every ethnography is partial and one researcher's experiences should never be taken as an objective benchmark of the presence or absence of violence and its effects. Critiques of ethnographic 'completeness' go back decades (e.g. Clifford, 1986; cf. Haraway, 1988), highlighting the extent to which researchers' positioning, questions, experiences and encounters shape their findings. Any attempt to achieve a complete ethnography of Brick Town, let alone Kingston, would have been both impossible and inadvisable. Despite recognizing the inevitability of partiality, my initial concern that 'not seeing violence' might equal a lack of ethnographic skills perhaps reflected my own and others' residual expectations of completeness. Either way, my experiences were corroborated in part through discussions with residents about my work. I asked two people from the neighborhood to read a manuscript I had submitted for review. One of them, 'Keith' (all names used here are pseudonyms), pointed to specific parts of my writing that confirmed to him that I had a sense of how Brick Town worked. For instance, he recognized my description of talking to another resident, who initially spoke guardedly but began to speak more freely when the corner don sitting close by moved off: 'When me read that, me know, that's how it go.' In addition to checking my descriptions and analysis with residents like Keith, I also discussed my findings with anthropologists doing ethnographic research in similar neighborhoods. In particular, working with two PhD candidates – Alana Osbourne and Tracian Meikle, both highly competent anthropologists who spent long periods of fieldwork in inner-city communities in Kingston but never had to 'dodge bullets' – confirmed to me that, despite popular imaginaries, gang violence need not be a constant or central factor in the everyday life of such a neighborhood.

The editors to this special issue suggested that I reflect on the possibility that I might have been 'missing the revolution', referring to Orin Starn's (1991) critique of ethnographic research in the Peruvian highlands in the 1970s, which failed to anticipate the rise of the Shining Path guerrilla movement. In an attempt to understand how these gaps in anthropological knowledge took shape, Starn points to what he calls 'Andeanism', an essentialist, romantic form of ethnographic representation that 'portrays contemporary highland peasants as outside the flow of modern history' (1991: 64).⁷ To my mind, the Kingston case is precisely the inverse of the 'Andeanism' that Starn sees as having occluded the vision of Peruvianist ethnographers. A dystopian 'Jamaicanist' lens through which many ethnographers and other commentators view Kingston makes it difficult to see anything *but* criminal, political and state violence, and may divert our analytical consideration away from other important phenomena and developments. There is a persistent popular and scholarly imagery of urban Jamaica that centers on violence, and this

tradition of representation, as I discuss in more detail further below, sometimes also evidences a undercurrent of racialized essentialism.

If violence is a central theme in ‘ghetto’ ethnographies, this may say as much about the researcher, and about publication conventions, as it does about the area under study. My writings about donmanship all recognize their role in violence, but do not give it narrative centrality.⁸ In so doing, I seek to balance what Didier Fassin distinguishes as reality and truth, two concepts that are constantly in tension: ‘the real being that which exists or has happened and the true being that which has to be regained from . . . convention’ (Fassin, 2014: 41). Violence is real in don-led neighborhoods like Brick Town, but the truth to everyday life there, and to the rule of dons, is perhaps less violent than conventional studies have suggested.

Safety and self-censorship

My relative lack of direct exposure to violence – whether in residents’ narratives or through direct observation – translated into a relative lack of attention to it in the public lectures and conference presentations I gave, and the articles I published, on this research. In academic circles, this lack of emphasis on the violent activities associated with organized crime and inner-city life often elicited surprise and sometimes disbelief, expressed by audience members during Q&As and by peer reviewers assessing manuscripts. I feel strongly that my representations of inner-city life and donmanship are at least as ‘true’ as the blood-soaked narratives that circulate in the popular media and feature in some academic accounts of these phenomena. However, my interpretations have no doubt been influenced by my own conscious and unconscious decisions and behavior during fieldwork. Specifically, in reflecting back, I think I resorted to various forms of self-censorship, in doing fieldwork but also in my ethnographic writing, as a form of semi-deliberate risk management.

Writing on the dilemmas of maintaining personal safety while doing qualitative research in ‘dangerous places’, Daniel Goldstein notes that minimizing risk often involves understanding and adopting local safety techniques: ‘The strategies local people have developed to avoid and manage quotidian violence present options for how to organize one’s own behavior so as to keep safe while conducting effective and productive social research’ (Goldstein, 2014: 14; see also Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). In Jamaica, one such local strategy involves not asking or talking too much about certain things, let alone writing about them, because, as the don’s rule goes, *informer fi dead*, snitches must be killed. Nonetheless, nearly all of my interviewees, from residents and dons to politicians and police officers, were on the whole surprisingly frank in speaking – anonymously, but on tape – about criminal leaders and their interactions with them.

Writing up research on crime and violence obviously involved risks to my interlocutors, both those who were (or had been) involved in criminal activities and those who were not. In addition to creating pseudonyms for interviewees, I began to include as few as possible descriptive characteristics in introducing them,

sacrificing ethnographic context and ambience for anonymity. Having asked Keith and another friend who had read my article manuscript, I was relieved to note that they did not recognize themselves where I quoted from interviews with them. I explicitly asked Keith whether he thought my research was risky, for me or the people interviewed, and whether it would be safe to publish the article. Fortunately he said he did not see any risk, not as long as I used different names. He also told me: 'One thing me have to rate [commend] you for. Me rate that you never get into the drugs thing and the guns thing.' Those things, he advised me, were kept very secret and if I started asking about those things people would get upset. I told him that I wasn't interested in those things at all and that it was better for everyone if I stayed away from those topics. Somewhat contradictorily, Keith then proceeded to tell me that the dons used the money they obtained through extortion to buy guns, to get into the drugs business. I told him maybe it would be better if he didn't tell me any of those things, and we moved on to other topics.

On the whole, these discussions and experiences gave me a sense of relative openness, but this had its limits. During a 2011 visit, one of the General's relatives, 'Lorraine', made a quasi-casual remark aimed at me, warning that 'We don't want no *Born Fi Dead*, it mash up the thing'. This was a reference to *Born fi' Dead* (literally, 'born to die'), a popular, semi-ethnographic book by Laurie Gunst (1996) on the relationship between Jamaica's gangs, politics, drugs and violence. In this bestseller, Gunst, a white American historian, had apparently failed to properly anonymize the individuals and events she had observed, and allegedly this resulted in at least one revenge killing. Given my outward similarity to Gunst, and my intention to publish my ethnographic research in written form, I was quite shaken by what I interpreted as Lorraine's implicit threat. I was not sure how to react and in the end, I more or less avoided her section of the neighborhood until I left for the Netherlands three weeks later. However, on my next return visit, almost a year later, she greeted me warmly with a hug and never made mention of Gunst's book or my writing project again. Perhaps, as a Jamaican colleague suggested, she was just 'testing' me to see how I would respond. Nonetheless, the incident, even if it consisted of no more than a nonchalant remark, made me consider even more carefully what I was writing, how it might be perceived by those associated with organized crime, and what the consequences might be for me if they took offense. One conscious decision I made was to scrap from a manuscript the discussion of an act of sexual violence attributed to one of the neighborhood's leaders – in part because it was not directly relevant to my argument, but in part because I was concerned about possible consequences for my own safety. Most of my information on this event derived from historical newspaper reports rather than from conversations with residents, so I was less concerned that respondents would be at risk. Still, I did ask myself whether any potential don-affiliated readers of my work would not connect my statements to those residents they could see me hanging out with most frequently. Given the success of criminal organizations in regulating the circulation of information and promoting self-censorship through their

strict sanctioning of informers, it would be naïve to think this effective regulation would not affect researchers such as myself.

The specter of sensationalism

Beyond physical safety, writing about criminal violence also involves ethical dilemmas related to representation in a broader sense. Following the ‘culture of poverty’ debates that accompanied the publication of Oscar Lewis’s work on the urban poor in the 1960s, much has been written about the potential harm that anthropological representations of low-income neighborhoods can inflict, as they feed sensationalist narratives and deleterious, blame-the-victim policy approaches (Bourgois, 2001). ‘Ghetto ethnographies’ that concentrate on violence run a similar risk, and even carefully worded studies may inadvertently play into existing stereotypes of certain people or places as deviant and dangerous. Especially when ethnographies privilege the neighborhood context over broader political economic and ideological structures, they may also be (mis)interpreted as indicating a ‘culture of violence’.

The ethical dilemmas of ethnographies that focus on crime and violence amongst marginalized populations came out clearly in recent critiques of *On the Run*, an ethnography of young African-American men in a West Philadelphia neighborhood by the white sociologist Alice Goffman (2014). Critical reviewers questioned the veracity of some of her claims, and condemned the ethically dubious decisions Goffman had made while doing fieldwork, taking part in what amounted to felony offenses (Lubet, 2015). In addition, they pointed out that her focus on criminal male youth reinforced existing racial stereotypes and contributed to the stigmatization of the majority of law-abiding African-Americans. Dwayne Betts (2014), for instance, noted sharply that

Goffman’s appeal comes from the danger she faced and the violence she witnessed. She gives what many readers expect: crack addiction and senseless crimes, including murder. [...] The book presents pathology as the central experience in black life. [...] Unwittingly, Goffman gives ammunition to tough-on-crime politicians who want to believe that urban areas are breeding grounds for crime and lawlessness.

Drawing on Victor Rios’s (2011) idea of the ‘jungle book trope’, Betts also suggests that the popularity of *On the Run* stemmed in part from its reliance on the racialized trope of white researchers immersing themselves in dangerous black spaces and surviving to tell the tale, making it difficult to avoid accusations of sensationalism. This echoes earlier anthropological self-critiques of ‘third-worlding at home’ (Koptiuch, 1991), in which the older trope of the colonial explorer anthropologist travelling to far-away, savage lands has been replaced by contemporary journeys into the supposedly impenetrable urban ghetto.

The debates over social-science (and particularly ethnographic) research on poverty and violence in African-American urban communities resonate with

studies of the same phenomena amongst African-Caribbean populations. Deborah Thomas (2011) points to a long tradition of research on Jamaica's 'exceptional violence', which has tended to resort to culturalist, essentialist explanations. These are racialized explanatory narratives that have often sought to locate the causes of crime and violence in 'deviant' African-Jamaican gender relations and family structures.

Social-science representations of Downtown Kingston and Jamaican transnational crime cannot be seen as fully separate from either local or international popular cultural and journalistic depictions. Jamaican popular music, films and fiction share a strong emphasis on violence (see Thomas, 2011: 147), while local and international journalistic reports on poverty and crime have also tended to reinforce the reputation of Jamaica's urban poor – and black male inner-city residents, in particular – as innately and excessively violent (Murji, 1999; D'Arcy, 2007). As Thomas notes (2014: 197), as a consequence of 'ghetto porn' representations of Kingston's inner-city neighborhoods,

the violence that occurs in these communities is seen as episodic and culturally derived rather than the result of structural and institutionalized political decisions over time [and] many Kingstonians (and Jamaicans, more generally) who do not live in downtown garrisons have a difficult time imagining people who do as being fully human [...]

Such considerations have also framed my representational choices in publishing on organized crime. My (probably not always successful) attempts to contextualize and de-sensationalize my neighborhood-based research findings were informed by an awareness of existing dystopian tendencies to concentrate on urban squalor and violence, and of the racialized representational frameworks in which I was operating. I sought to emphasize the entanglement of criminal leaders with formal state actors, and to analyze the local legitimacy that dons enjoyed in relation to their governance role, rather than understanding the support they received as rooted in any specific cultural or moral dispositions on the part of inner-city residents. By focusing on the dons' increased role in public service provision, and connecting this to the roll-back policies of structural adjustment, I also sought to draw comparisons to 'irregular' non-state governance actors in other contexts and, in so doing, to de-exceptionalize the Jamaican case.

Somewhat ironically given the widespread academic denunciation of sensational ethnographies, when presenting my research to colleagues both in and outside Jamaica, my discussion of inner-city life seemed to receive more enthusiastic responses than my elaboration of broader political structures or bureaucratic entanglements. In addition to queries about my possible romanticization of the dons – almost inevitably asked by colleagues who had some general knowledge of donmanship but had never conducted research on the topic – I was almost always asked whether it was not dangerous to do this type of research, especially as a white woman. This resonates, perhaps, with the interpretation of Goffman's

On the Run as deriving some of its popularity from racialized and gendered pre-conceptions. Such ideas about the difficulties and dangers of a white-identified woman's access were, in my experience, part of a complex dynamic maintained not only by non-black, non-Jamaican researchers or audiences but also by local urban elites, including academics and policymakers. On the whole, the tone of questions and comments I received was supportive or even admiring; even critical scholars may be fascinated by first-hand stories of 'ghetto life', and despite my intentions to emphasize context, I experienced such responses as a type of subtle encouragement to privilege neighborhood research over political or policy analyses.

In my discussions of Brick Town, however, talking and writing 'around' violent and more broadly illegal activities – whether those of dons or residents – was one way in which I tried to avoid falling into the trap of sensationalism. I had seen other colleagues enthrall audiences with gripping tales of dodging bullets, but felt that such narratives, while undoubtedly informed by the harrowing nature of such experiences, ultimately confirmed existing stereotypes and diverted attention away from more complex stories.

In one instance, I asked one of my closest friends in the neighborhood why he had returned to Jamaica after living abroad for quite some time. I knew he had been in some sort of trouble with the law but had not wanted to pry. As the topic came up in a conversation, though, I figured we had known each other long enough that I might ask, and he casually answered that he had been in jail for several years for shooting at the police. 'Okay...' I asked him, 'So why did you shoot the police?' 'Well, they were shooting at us, and we had weapons.' After a pause, he added, 'We were drunk.' I was taken aback that someone whom I had come to know as a very thoughtful and gentle person had been imprisoned for such an apparently pointless act, but it did not affect our relationship or my general impression of him.

I tended not to include this type of anecdotes in my publications, in part because they were not fully relevant to the analytical points I was interested in making. In part, however, such (conscious or unconscious) decisions are probably a form of what Sherry Ortner (1995) has called 'the problem of ethnographic refusal': the tendency to underemphasize certain forms of exploitation or violence that characterize the internal politics of one's interlocutors, whether out of fear of reinforcing their stigmatization, or a romantic desire to see them as involved in only resistance rather than in oppression as well. This sanitization of politics, she argues, often expresses itself in overly harmonious, uncritical depictions of the political order of oppressed groups. More thorough and critical ethnographic writing, in contrast, can 'tease out the ways in which such things as the apparent benevolent authority of elders or the apparent altruism and solidarity of kin are often grounded in systematic patterns of exploitation and power' (1995: 197). Ortner also points to the related danger of 'cultural thinning': overemphasizing political economic explanations while disregarding the cultural complexity of both domination and resistance.

Following Ortner, my underexploration of the dons' use of violence and the ambivalence expressed by some residents towards their rule is a likely flaw in my representation of donmanship. Whether this skew in representation is rooted in romanticism is a different matter. None of the dons struck me as 'social bandits' heroically resisting the system (see Hobsbawm, 1959), although some of them certainly sought to develop a reputation of honor and integrity. However, my general impression was that the most effective dons did not use violence lightly. Their use of violence seemed calculated rather than extreme, confirming a cultural logic of when physical punishment or the use of weapons was appropriate, rather than exceeding this logic in any spectacular or sadistic fashion. This is not to say there are no sadists among them, or that Jamaican criminals do not sometimes resort to spectacular, excessive forms of violence precisely because of the strategic effect. However, those dons and residents I encountered, and the violence they spoke of, did not appear to fit these categories.

Coping with violence

A final reason for writing around violence is that this avoidance functions as a psychological coping mechanism. Sometimes, during interviews, residents' responses to questions would develop into a sort of confessional monologue. This was the case with one fieldwork friend, 'Iyah', whom I had known for some time before asking him whether I could do a taped interview. As usual, I started off by asking him to tell me a little about the history of the neighborhood and how he had seen it change first-hand over time, a question that usually led residents to discuss changes in its (criminal) leadership over time. In this case, Iyah started by telling me about his childhood and growing up in Downtown Kingston in the 1960s. He mentioned that as young boys from the neighborhood, they would run all over Downtown, skating through the gullies and waging kite battles with children from other neighborhoods. This, he explained, was before garrison politics pitted residents from Brick Town, a neighborhood affiliated with the People's National Party (PNP), against those from adjacent areas supporting the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP):

We and the said youth . . . cook outta one pot, eat outta one pot, wear one shoes and pants, [but because] politics now come in them mind and them thoughts now, them split up and divide and get segregation. . . . They bring a thing named 'borderline' and from you deal with PNP . . . you can't go cross the border, pure shots will fire 'pon you. So the place just come up and get mess up by those bigger boys, big politician guys.

I asked him how old he was in the 1970s when things started to get 'messed up'. Perhaps he misunderstood my question but he started by answering 'You see, '72 is the first time me go to jail for felonious wounding. . .' This triggered him to start a long and detailed description of violent acts he had committed and the total of

23 years he had spent in jail for these crimes. Starting an account of his sentencing to juvenile detention for stabbing a man in 1972, Iyah moved on to discuss personal disputes, political warfare, drugs-related conflicts and prison riots. In addition to his accounts of his own acts of violence, his description of a prison riot – triggered by a proposal to introduce condoms amongst male prisoners, to prevent HIV from spreading between them – was especially gruesome:

Riot broke out in the prison, pure chopping up and burn up and murder and stab up and all them things. Even men in them cell . . . some batty boy [homosexuals] in them cell, me tell you, the men burn them out so that them have to use broom and sweep them up, chop them up, stab them up . . . So riot is going on wild-wild, me tell you, for four days and four nights the prisoners lock down, it's prisoners control it. . . . Every man hold them corner, every man you see, them have knife, cutlass, ratchet, acid, gun, dynamite, everything in there. . . . Well you have certain time in the war now . . . every walk you walk it's dead man surround you, or a cell burn out over there with a man, or two man, get stab up and gone to hospital. . . . A guy named Lloydie . . . them murder him before the warder, and the warders have them gun in them hand and them can't do nothing, them have to look to defend them own self. . . . As that done, them just attack building and light three cells on fire, with them in there and you stay a mile away and still hear when them skull bust, me tell you, man, it vicious, man.

I left this interview feeling shaken and numb from hearing these gory accounts – not so different from some of the descriptions in James's *A Brief History* – and part of me also felt like a bad researcher for letting the interview 'run away' from me. In addition, I was not sure how Iyah's account related to my broader research questions about donmanship, governance and citizenship, beyond perhaps underlining the blurring of political, criminal, institutional and interpersonal forms of violence. I decided to do nothing with the stories Iyah had told me. They might have fit into another research project centering on violence, but I did not see how I could incorporate Iyah's account as a side topic, given the moral, political and methodological complexity of analyzing his long-term experiences of and participation in violence. This example, of course, reflects a problem inherent in all efforts to translate our many, messy fieldwork experiences into writing – the problem of what to include and what to disregard is not unique to fieldwork that involves encounters with, or discussions of, violence.

Beyond such analytical considerations, though, I did not feel psychologically up to the task of dealing with these experiences. While working in Downtown Kingston meant being confronted with various types of deprivation, I realized that I did not feel equipped to engage in detailed discussions of violence with perpetrators, and probably not with victims either. (The fact that Iyah himself was killed in an interpersonal conflict, a few years later and after he had moved to a rural community, emphasized that perpetrators are often victims too, and added to my conflicted feelings about our interview.) In this sense, writing – or interviewing – around violence functioned as a coping mechanism. While I knew

that many of the residents I spent time with had committed, and often suffered, violent acts, focusing on other topics and other dimensions of organized crime than violence made it possible for me to feel comfortable in their presence – in short, deemphasizing violence made it possible for me to start and complete my fieldwork.

Conclusion

The popular and commercial appeal of narratives of violence is not restricted to journalistic, musical or literary representations. Ethnographers, too, may be ‘rewarded’ for writing about violence. In my own work, I did not write in much detail about violence, although it was clearly a phenomenon that shaped the neighborhood environment where I did most of my fieldwork. In retrospect, this representational ‘choice’ was made largely unconsciously and implicitly. In this article I have sought to reflect on, and make explicit, the various reasons for ethnographically decentering violence in such a context. How to ‘write violence’ is an ethical dilemma without easy, universally applicable answers. No researcher wants to be accused of writing ‘violence porn’, but nor do we want to be seen as denying (or overlooking) a lived reality in which violence plays an important role. In his work on crack dealers in 1980s New York, Philippe Bourgois (2003) discusses some of these representational dilemmas. He underlines the complexity of avoiding depictions of perpetrators that end up blaming the victim, while also taking care not to overemphasize structures of oppression in ways that ignore individual and collective agency. Echoing Sherry Ortner’s critique of ethnographic refusal, he stresses that editing evident social misery out of one’s ethnographic account ‘out of a righteous, or a “politically sensitive,” fear of giving the poor a bad image’ entails a complicity with oppression. However, he continues to stress the risk of writing a ‘pornography of violence that reinforces racist stereotypes’ (2003: 12).

My ethnographic work on Jamaican dons and criminal organizations largely avoided detailed descriptions of the violence that is associated with their presence in low-income neighborhoods. It could be argued that this approach was limiting methodologically and conceptually. For instance, my reluctance to steer interviews and conversations towards the topics of violence, weapons and drugs crime might have limited my understanding of actually existing practices. This could have led me to project incorrect motives and probable actions onto violent actors, perhaps misunderstanding the risks to respondents and myself. Conceptually, analyzing dons as governmental actors without focusing on the violence involved in their rule could be seen as overlooking the role of violence in underpinning governance.

Is it ethically justifiable and epistemologically sound to produce ethnographies of violent actors without dwelling in detail on their acts of violence? Given the skew in studies of criminal organizations, and of inner-city life, towards extensive description of and analytical attention toward violence, I continue to find it justifiable to produce ethnographic narratives that decenter it. In fact, this decentering can be an analytically generative, rather than defensive in itself. Beyond

sensationalism, violence remains a compelling form of human behavior. But what might ethnographers who work with violent actors or in violent situations see if we look *beyond* violence? Might dwelling more directly on other social phenomena enable the development of new frameworks for understanding everyday practices in violent contexts? Could it help us see more clearly how social processes in these contexts are comparable to those in peaceful ones? Studying criminal organizations through less common frameworks – directing our attention to the exigencies of public service provision in a neoliberal era, or to the role of aesthetics in producing legitimate authority, or to the centrality of non-state actors in making the electoral process socially meaningful – can open new avenues of exploration that may be obscured if we continue to satisfy popular and academic expectations of the centrality of violence. It is likely that decentering and de-exceptionalizing violence in our analyses of other conflict-affected contexts might similarly enable new perspectives.

Another parallel question, raised by my introduction to this essay, might be: is it ethically justifiable and epistemologically sound to produce novels of ethnographic and historical verisimilitude about violent actors that dwell in detail on their acts of violence? My answer would always be yes. Novelists such as Marlon James are, in their works of the imagination, never bound to the same considerations as academics. This does not preclude a social-scientific interrogation of the political or epistemic effects of such literary works, especially given their intermediality with other forms of representation. Indeed, as Sherry Ortner (1995: 189) points out, ‘the novelist can no longer pretend that, in contrast to ethnography or history, there is nobody on the other side of his or her text’. In writing about violence – whether as an ethnographer or a novelist, a historian or a reggae singer – our words always interact, in one way or another, with the lives of the perpetrators as well as the survivors of that violence.

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Notes

1. Indeed, in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel, James (2014: 687) emphasizes the amount of research that went into writing the book, thanking a series of research assistants. He also starts the book with the epigraph 'If it no go so, it go near so' (if this is not how it went, this is more or less how it went), framing his novel as blurring the line between fiction and historical-anthropological fact. Reflections on the boundaries between fiction and ethnography have, of course, a much longer history in anthropology, from James Clifford and George Marcus's (1986) seminal collection *Writing Culture* to a recent article by Didier Fassin (2014), who compares his own anthropological work in South Africa and urban France with J.M. Coetzee's novel *The Life and Times of Michael K*, and David Simon's widely acclaimed television series *The Wire*.
2. James presumably has also pondered these concerns; in the novel, he includes a scene in which Jamaican criminals in New York torture Alex Pierce, a fictional American journalist who is writing an exposé of the connections between music, gangs and politics, in a series of *New Yorker* articles titled 'A Brief History of Seven Killings'.
3. In fact, even before it won the Man Booker Prize, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* had sold significantly better than James's two previous novels, quickly accruing positive reviews and smaller literary prizes, while the screen rights were reported to have been bought by HBO (at the time of writing, an adaptation as an Amazon TV series is in the works). While the novelist recognizes the potentially stigmatizing effect of writing about violence, he has argued in an interview that 'I think we're too over-concerned with "brand Jamaica", which can sometimes blind us to opportunities. So, instead of worry about whether a story about a murder would lead to people thinking murders happen in Jamaica, maybe focus on the world thinking Jamaica can be a place of complicated, sophisticated and irresistible stories' (Campbell, 2015).
4. For an extended critical discussion of the privileging within social science and policy circles of 'culture of violence' theories in explaining violence in Jamaica and elsewhere in the African Diaspora, see Thomas (2011).
5. While many Brick Town residents appeared to consider the activities of their former don as legitimate, he was a relatively powerful and popular leader. There is significant variation amongst dons and their organizations, in terms of their political and economic clout, their commitment and ability to provide public goods and services, their use of violence, and their local legitimacy (see e.g. Levy, 2009; Blake, 2013).
6. I have developed the following ideas on visibility and temporality in discussion with Alana Osbourne, whose dissertation focused on violence and tourism in Trench Town (Osbourne, 2018).
7. In addition, he points to the dominance of largely apolitical theoretical approaches (specifically, symbolic anthropology and cultural ecology) amongst the Andeanist anthropologists of the era.

8. One article does focus more directly on violence, in its relation to sovereignty and law (Jaffe, 2015).

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