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Security Encounters: Negotiating Authority and Citizenship during the Tivoli “Incursion”

Anthony Harriott and Rivke Jaffe

In August 2009, the Jamaican government received a request from the US government to extradite Christopher “Dudus” Coke, who was at the time the island’s most powerful criminal leader, or “don.” This confronted then prime minister Bruce Golding and the ruling Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) with a major political dilemma as they sought both to prevent antagonizing the United States and to protect Coke, who had longstanding connections to the JLP. The government initially declined to extradite Coke, framing the US request as an affront to Jamaica’s sovereignty. It was evident, however, that the political and economic clout of criminal organizations such as Coke’s Presidential Click also compromised state sovereignty. In May 2010, following growing domestic and international pressure, Golding announced his decision to comply with this extradition request, and, to avoid being arrested, Coke mobilized some four hundred armed men and at least one armed woman. This was the largest armed resistance against the Jamaican state since the Maroon wars, which formally ended in 1738. On 24 May 2010, the army launched an operation to arrest Coke and to suppress his organization, entering his neighborhood stronghold, Tivoli Gardens, in what became known as the Tivoli Incursion. This security operation was monumental also in terms of the military mobilization of some 800 soldiers and 370 police officers; in the number of fatalities (72 in total) and mass detentions (over 2,000 from Tivoli Gardens); and, in general, in the range and

scale of the excesses against not only the armed resistance but also the unarmed supporting parties and passive third-party residents of the neighborhood.¹

In this essay we analyze encounters between Tivoli Gardens residents and members of the security forces during the May 2010 operation. We understand these (often violent) interactions as extreme examples of “security encounters,” in which security professionals and citizens negotiate specific roles, rights, and responsibilities. Such encounters are political performances: security professionals seek to assert their authority in particular ways, while citizens use various strategies to claim political belonging. Focusing on one case in particular, we suggest that police and soldiers, acting in part out of fear, performed a version of violent, arbitrary authority that perhaps sought to mirror and replace that of dons. Meanwhile, Tivoli Gardens residents sought to protect their own lives and those of their loved ones by mobilizing embodied and discursive performances of citizenship. Our analysis of this case draws from the records of the West Kingston Commission of Inquiry, 2014–2016 (hereafter WKC), in which the first author acted as one of the commissioners.²

Security Encounters

We introduce the idea of security encounters here as a conceptual and methodological tool that can aid in understanding how relations of authority and citizenship are negotiated. Conceptually, encounters more generally have been analyzed fruitfully as engagements across difference, in which knowledge, relationships, subjectivities, and group boundaries are negotiated and reconfigured.³ These engagements, which often involve asymmetrical relationships, are central to the production, reproduction, and transformation of cultural and political categories. Encounters, then, are especially important because of the relational processes of meaning-making they facilitate.

We define security encounters as engagements between security professionals (such as police and soldiers, but also private security guards) and members of the public. These engagements constitute a specific, highly political type of encounter in which different actors claim or reject their positioning as threatened, threatening, or protector. Studying the form these encounters take can help us understand how security providers assert their authority over populations and territories and how they produce or reproduce differentiated citizenship; it can also provide insight into how citizens seek to develop relations of rights and

1 These numbers represent the official count of the West Kingston Commission of Inquiry, 2014–2016; the fatalities included sixty-nine civilians, one soldier, and two constables. David Simmonds, Hazel Harris, and Anthony Harriott, *Never, Never Again: Report of the West Kingston Commission of Inquiry into Events which Occurred in West Kingston and Related Areas, 2010*, 15 June 2016, Ministry of Justice, moj.gov.jm/news/report-western-kingston-commission-enquiry-2016.

2 The data sources include more than 458 witness statements by residents of Tivoli Gardens, police, and soldiers of various ranks who participated in the operation; statements by government officials and hundreds of classified state documents, some of which were useful for triangulating the witness statements; and 94 testimonies that were given before the commission during the period from December 2014 to February 2016. See Simmonds, Harris, and Harriott, *Never, Never Again*.

3 See Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel, “Ethnographies of Encounter,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 363–77.

responsibilities with these providers. Such encounters reproduce existing political roles and relations but also entail some room for creatively negotiating and reconfiguring them.

Methodologically, we can analyze security encounters as political performances, an approach that guides our attention to how authority and citizenship are imagined and enacted. This involves attending to how participants consciously or unconsciously use poetics, rhetoric, bodily movement, spatial location, and objects to affirm or contest their political positioning within and beyond the encounter. Security encounters should, of course, never be analyzed as singular events; they take shape iteratively and are interpreted in the context of longer historical trajectories, while media representations also set parameters for interaction. Ethnography is an important method in developing such an analysis of security encounters as political performances. In this essay, however, we apply this approach to court transcripts, which involve highly detailed—albeit after-the-fact—narrative descriptions of security encounters. There is, of course, an important distinction between analyzing oral testimonies of such encounters and observing the original interactions themselves; a focus on testimonies means our understanding of the encounters is necessarily mediated by a lack of embodied experience, the passing of time, and the influence of the formal, scripted nature of an enquiry or truth commission.⁴

Drawing here on the WKC transcripts, we view the security encounters that took place during the 2010 operation as extreme examples of how police and soldiers asserted their authority in the most violent way, while residents sought to be recognized as citizens rather than as threats to security. While the events of May 2010 in Tivoli Gardens were extraordinary, these dramatic encounters parallel more routine confrontations between the Jamaica Constabulary Force and residents of inner-city neighborhoods, which often involve similar high-stakes negotiations.

The Case of Veronica Muirhead

We focus here on one specific case, a single police-military encounter with a group of citizens that took place 25 May 2010. This case was selected from many similar others that occurred during the security operation. The entire community was subjected to a counterinsurgency house-clearance exercise, during which most of the then approximately ten thousand residents had an involuntary encounter with the security forces.⁵ The security forces have been accused of approximately forty extrajudicial killings, and they detained some two thousand men. The outcomes of the encounters were different for different members of the community, but there were clear patterns to these encounters with the policing power of the state.

4 For a reflection on the relations between witnessing, testimony, and “secondary witnessing” by nonparticipants, see Annie E. Coombes, “Witnessing History / Embodying Testimony: Gender and Memory in Post-apartheid South Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. S1 (2011): S92–112.

5 Population estimates range from a low of ten thousand to a high of twenty-five thousand. The first is the census count and the second is the estimate by the military. Other state agencies have made mid-range estimates.

Veronica Muirhead, a middle-aged mother, described her encounter with police and soldiers at her house. Her two sons, Dwayne and Andre, were taken from her home and into the street, where they were grouped with three other men, whom she recognized by name as Denton, Giffy, and Escobar. She recounted the events in response to questions put to her by council for the commission. She started by explaining that she had begun to cry when her sons were made to lie flat on the street. Asked why she had started to cry, she responded:

VM: Because they were, they [the police] were killing while moving from at the top of the road coming down. And when I heard the gunshots, I said, I am not going inside, I am staying right out there.

C: That's what you said?

VM: Yes. I tell myself that, I am staying right out there.⁶

It was clear that Tivoli Gardens residents expected that death would be visited on their households by the security forces if a young male was present. However, even faced with the overwhelming physical force of the police and soldiers, women such as Ms. Muirhead had some measure of agency in negotiating the outcome of these encounters. Multiple testimonies emphasized that the security forces relied on a combination of age and gender in “identifying” criminals. During their house-clearance exercises, the security forces made a visual inspection of all men, evidencing a general suspicion of maleness.

This suspicion was, however, age-graded, as was illustrated starkly in another case, that of Marjorie Williams. The security forces allowed her and her two teenage daughters to stay in the house, as well as her father, an elderly man in his eighties, whom they respectfully addressed as “Daddy.” Her forty-year-old brother was detained for processing. Her sons, seventeen and twenty years old, were taken outside and killed soon after.⁷ The general assumption, then, was that young men, often referred to as “youth,” were gunmen, although in certain cases officers would waive this presumption on learning more about a young man’s livelihood, family responsibility, and demeanor.⁸ In contrast, during the operation, as during many other security operations in inner-city neighborhoods, police and soldiers tended to engage older women with much more respect; while suspected of aiding and abetting criminals, older women were rarely treated as direct threats.

By being present, and employing their bodies as an unmovable physical shield, women sought to offer their sons and other men a measure of protection. In preparation for the operation, the police had offered to evacuate members of the community, especially women and children. Many residents interpreted this offer to mean that the security forces wanted to

⁶ WKC, Verbatim Notes Day 61, 20 October 2015, 69.

⁷ WKC, Verbatim Notes Day 59, 22 September 2015, 10–12, 22–23.

⁸ In one case, the security forces burned a man’s house because its location put it under suspicion. On further interactions, however, they reinterpreted his person as a “decent young man” and proceeded to treat him very differently than many other young men. This young man was in a common-law union and was a very enterprising self-employed person. He gave evidence at the WKC that was marked by an optimistic outlook on his future and by his polite manner. WKC, Verbatim Notes Day 8, 10 December 2014.

remove the women so that they could kill the men without impediment. This belief reveals not just the deep distrust of the police but also the expectation that the women can play this protective role. Indeed, as Kevin, a neighbor of Mrs. Williams's, was led out of his house to what would be his death, he appealed to her to protect him, saying, "Marjorie, give me a hand."⁹

In addition to physically using her female body to shield male bodies that were in this context more vulnerable, by "staying right there," Ms. Muirhead and other women like her also insisted on witnessing, on opening up the possibility of a future in which they might hold the perpetrators accountable in court. This witnessing presented the security forces with the risk of legal accountability, which provided the male residents with some measure of legal protection. (While this risk of prosecution may have seemed slim to all involved, Ms. Muirhead did in fact have the courage to testify during the WKC hearings.) Ms. Muirhead went on to describe the first direct contact with the police as they approached her house: "I don't know, but di police came in and one a them called out to us and said, 'A mi birthday, a duppy mi seh.' When I heard that, I held my two sons and said 'Cover us under the blood [of Christ]. I believe in God and believed that on the strength of my belief in God, we would not be hurt."¹⁰ The police officer's words, "A mi birthday, a duppy mi seh," literally translate to, "It's my birthday, I say: ghosts." This suggestion that the officer had come to celebrate his birthday by killing entailed a promise to slay without the niceties of pretext or justification, of arbitrary malice and violence, and residents understood the statement as such. The council sought confirmation that Ms. Muirhead had seen dead bodies in the road and four men lying down on the sidewalk, and asked her what happened next.

VM: Oh, a policeman stood up and turned to a soldier that were standing at my gate and said, "Send over one a dem boy deh," and the soldier pointed to my son, Dwayne, and said, "You want him?" And the policeman said, "Send him over," to which the soldier said, "No, I am not sending him. He is my boy. I told his mother I am going to bring them back safe to her."

C: So after the soldier said that to the policeman, what happened next?

VM: He [the soldier] put Dwayne to stay right there.

C: Yes, and then what happened after?

VM: After they put Dwayne to lay down, I was crying. And when I was crying, the policeman insisted. He did like this and said, "woman."

C: When you say, "do like this," what you mean?

VM: He held the gun, the long gun. Yes, police held the gun at me. He was in my yard. And over my kids. He said, "Woman guh inna yuh blood cloth house."

Reading the acts of the police as related by Ms. Muirhead here, we see the officer deliberately seeking to enact an unrestrained type of sovereign power over the community (and the bodies of young men in particular): the capacity to rule over life and death with impunity. The officer's call to "send over one of those boys" can be interpreted as an assertion of the security

⁹ WKC, Verbatim Notes Day 59, 22 September 2015, 16.

¹⁰ WKC, Verbatim Notes Day 61, 20 October 2015, 120.

forces' ability to target victims arbitrarily, to punish without the restraint of law. This form of authority aligns with what Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat call informal or de facto sovereignty, "the right over life" or "the ability to kill, punish and discipline with impunity," which they contrast with formal or legal sovereignty, the "legitimate right to govern" that is "grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality."¹¹ What the security forces' behavior shows is their capacity to blur these categories of formal and informal. Even as officers justified their violence before and after the operation through reference to the rule of law, during the operation they intentionally sought to claim authority by performing an "unruly" form of sovereignty that treated all residents as killable.

The officers' wielding of the long gun and their use of offensive language—addressing Ms. Muirhead as "Woman" and telling her to go into her "blood cloth" house—suggest a desire to project a violent style of authority, a seeming approximation of the behavior of a "shotta."¹² Their use of language and weapons frames the encounter as being similar to a gunman-citizen encounter, with obedience driven by fear of violence rather than by the legitimacy of the command. Ms. Muirhead, in contrast, points to the illegitimacy of such actions in part by making rights claims, emphasizing that the police officer was in *her yard*, holding his gun *at her* and over *her kids*, violating both her right to life (and that of her children) and her property rights. The council went on to ask Ms. Muirhead whether she did anything when the police officer ordered her to go into her house.

VM: Yes, sir. I said, "Officer, I want to go in but I can't go in. Please, I want to go in but I can't go in. Mi belly, mi belly a burn mi. I can't move. I can't move."

C: Take your time.

VM: Sir, I don't like to remember it, Jesus! Every time I remember it—Jesus, thank you.

C: All right, after you told the Officer that, what happened next?

VM: A soldier man came across the road, and a policeman, a big man, came cross the road. The policeman held my head, rubbed it and said, "Mummy, you trouble with pressure?" And I turned and said, "No, but anything could happen to me now." And he said, "Mommy, please. Mummy, I am not going to make anything happen to them [your sons]. I am going to see to it that I take them in and make them come back safe to you." And mi turn and say, "Please if you could take me with them, just take me with them." And he said, "No, you can't come, you can't come,"

C: All right, so what happened to your sons now and the other two men, Denton and Escobar?

VM: The police, took them and told them to go across the street and send . . .

C: Just one minute. Did you go cross the street?

VM: Yes, like from here to there. A truck . . .

C: A what?

11 Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Sovereignty Revisited," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 296.

12 This comparison with the conduct of the gunmen was also made by one of the armed men who fought with Coke on 24 May 2010. Writing in his journal, Cedric "Doggie" Murray noted that 24 May 2010 was "a day of war": "All hell broke loose . . . [and] Babylon prove how they are even worst [sic] than the gunman." Yet dons' use of violence is not necessarily arbitrary, but bound up with alternative systems of legality. See Rivke Jaffe, "From Maroons to Dons: Sovereignty, Violence, and Law in Jamaica," *Critique of Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2015): 47–63.

VM: Truck was parked there with the dead bodies.

C: Just one minute. And what happened after they went over to the truck?

VM: After they went over to the truck, the policeman and the soldier came back to me and looked at me and said: “Mommy, I know that your boys are not bad and I am going to make them come back, so just relax and just take everything easy.” And I said, “Alright, I am going to try.” Shortly after that I saw them coming out with Marjorie’s two sons.¹³

Giffy, Escobar, and three others were killed. Their bodies were put into a truck that already contained several bodies. Ms. Muirhead’s sons were then instructed to climb into the truck with the bodies. They were both rescued by soldiers who made good on their promise to return them safely to their mother; the soldiers took her sons from the death truck and put them among the men who were to be detained for processing.

These violent, arbitrary performances were not simply the power plays of individual police officers; they represent a pattern of behavior that finds institutional support within the police force and elsewhere within the state.¹⁴ In another instance during the security operation, at another location where people were being cleared from a building, a police officer instructed the men present to form a line. As the men sought to comply with the instructions, one of the constables announced that “the last man in the line would be killed.”

From a psychological perspective, this style of punitive violence has the signature of fear projected outward, where a fearful but powerful individual is driven to totally destroy the source of his or her fear. Indeed, it seems clear that the security forces felt significant fear, but also a sense of vindication (for some, perhaps fueled by party-political allegiances) at being able to enter a community that had been off limits to them for decades.¹⁵ Yet, interpreted through a more sociological lens, these security encounters involved representatives of the state who are empowered by law to use violence and citizens who claim rights that ought to be protected under the same legal authority. Read this way, the manifest arbitrariness of the violence makes sense as an effort to bring about not just compliance but submission (compliance without even a hint or promise of resistance) to “reclaim” formal sovereignty through informal means in a territory that was previously shielded from law enforcement. The rescue of Ms. Muirhead’s sons confirmed rather than challenged the arbitrariness of the violence.

Even in the face of such acts of de facto sovereignty, we can recognize both the effort and the limits of the ability of people to negotiate this threat of violence and to claim, if obliquely, the rights of citizenship. By performing citizenship, Ms. Muirhead sought to change the terms of the security encounter to convincingly communicate the innocence of her sons, at a time

¹³ These young men were killed, possibly as an arbitrary substitution for Ms. Muirhead’s sons.

¹⁴ See Anthony Harriott, *Controlling Violent Crime: Models and Policy Options* (Kingston: Grace Kennedy Foundation, 2009).

¹⁵ At the WKC, council for the Office of the Public Defender suggested that the police offenders were motivated by revenge for the death of two colleagues killed on the night before the operation. There is, however, much greater evidence that the police officers were gripped by fear: some testified of the spread of fear in their units after the killings and of its effects on their behavior, including the delay of the Jamaica Constabulary Force units in entering the neighborhood on 24 May.

when all young men were under suspicion as gunmen and the entire community, including the women, were under suspicion as supporters of the armed “insurrection.”

Ms. Muirhead sought in part to dissipate suspicion by mobilizing the symbols of religion, calling out “Cover us under the blood [of Christ]” when she and her sons were first taken from their home. She proclaimed her belief in God not only during this witnessing but also at the beginning of her testimony to the commission, rooting the reliability of her account in religious respectability. Second, having placed herself within the moral order that the police officers sought to protect, she had to mobilize empathy from the police and soldiers who demanded submission. In seeking to maintain her presence as an unmovable body in sight of her sons, this meant being successfully noncompliant with the command of the police that she withdraw into her house. In the dramaturgy of crying and communicating her emotions, through the intensely affective aspects of the encounter she sought to encode signs of willingness to obey, even as she resisted.

In an effort to put an end to her resistance, the police used threatening language to signal that they were willing to kill her if she remained noncompliant. Even then, she did not submit, but produced a masterly performance of offering compliance and feigning submission while maintaining her resistance: “Officer, I want to go in but I can’t go in. . . . I can’t move, I can’t move.” This is a brilliant reframing of her encounter with an overbearing and unbearable power that disregards right. She unambiguously stated that she wished to be compliant (“I want to go in”), a law-abiding citizen who knows her responsibilities vis-à-vis the police, but her body was being noncompliant *with her will*. She separated her will (to obey) from the disobedience or resistance of the body: it was this body without volition that was now resisting despite her effort to have it submit to their power. The suggestion in her declaration was that if the police wanted to remove her from the street, then they would have to move beyond threats in word and gesture to target her body as a disobedient corporeal mass. In doing so, they would have to violate norms prohibiting the use of violence against women, in this case a respectable woman of God.

This aspect of her performance had the effect of generating further support. She could assess this support to be available to her, based on the response to her earlier actions, which generated a split between the soldiers and the police. These final assertions had the effect of splitting the police; a police officer now walked over with the soldier. As the security officers moved from calling her “Woman” to addressing her repeatedly as “Mummy” and “Mommy,” her words and actions succeeded in getting them to acknowledge her humanity, to recognize her as a respectable mother-citizen.

Political Dramaturgy and Its Limits

Sovereign power and citizenship are not givens; these political relations must be claimed, performed, enacted. Even in the context of highly asymmetrical security encounters, faced with the overwhelming force used by police and soldiers asserting their dominance over a territory and a population, vulnerable individuals seek to negotiate the terms of the encounter and to transform their positioning from killable subjects to citizens with rights. Where the acts of the security forces purposefully confounded the analytical categories of formal and informal sovereignty, residents' dramaturgy of citizenship sought to hail them as representatives of a legal, rule-bound sovereignty. We might understand such negotiations in the context of longer historical trajectories of rights claims in the face of violence, from protests against the brutality of the colonial state to encounters with the early postindependence security forces, and even in the ways inner-city residents seek to reframe their relations to dons.¹⁶

Yet how legitimate is legal sovereignty if it is grounded in inequality? As Yarimar Bonilla notes, colonial histories demonstrate that "sovereignty as a legal concept is . . . grounded in concrete material practices of dispossession, the practical work of disenfranchisement, and the creation of legal regimes of difference."¹⁷ The limits to negotiating political relations within security encounters are evident, not only in the spectacular violence used in West Kingston in May 2010, but also in the regularity with which police brutality occurs in impoverished urban areas. Legally decreed, spatially circumscribed States of Emergency and Zones of Special Operation bolster common classifications of all inner-city residents as presumed guilty based on their urban location (with its complicated, historical entanglement with class, skin color, and party-political affiliation). As our discussion indicates, these residents do have room for political maneuvering—but enduring differentiations of citizenship provide some of them with more possibilities to do so than others. As the security encounters that we have examined here indicate, age and gender can mitigate or exacerbate the presumption of criminality. Some Tivoli residents could mobilize normative gender roles to protect themselves and their loved ones. Others were marked for death.

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¹⁶ See, for example, Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Rivke Jaffe, "The Hybrid State: Crime and Citizenship in Urban Jamaica," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 4 (2013): 734–48.

¹⁷ Yarimar Bonilla, "Unsettling Sovereignty," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2017): 332.