

In Trinidad and Tobago, an interesting process is now underway to build a social movement through the umbrella Federation of Independent Trade Unions and NGOs, or FITUN, which is pointedly pronounced “fight on.” FITUN groups together radical trade unions (the OWTU and the Communication Workers’ Union) with a diverse set of NGOs (such as the Trinidad Youth Council, the National Land Tenants and Ratepayers’ Association and the local chapter of Disabled Peoples International) and CBOs (such as the East Port of Spain Council of Community Organizations). These groups consider their independent stance vital if they are to separate the social movement from the traditional electoral parties, especially in the context of the ethnic polarization that occurs with elections. FITUN is thus attempting to bridge the racial, ethnic, age- and class-based gaps that have developed in the mass movement over the years.

As neoliberal policies result in growing inequity and the absence of social justice in Trinidad and Tobago’s petro-

leum-based economy, signs of popular movements continue to stir. As of March 2006, community-based protests have taken place against the proposed construction of two aluminum smelters, the clearing of working-class areas of Port-of-Spain in a gentrification strategy and planned expenditures on mega-projects—a sporting complex, a cultural center, a convention-center-cum-hotel—each to cost in excess of \$100 million.

Ultimately, today’s Caribbean social organizations need to return to their roots in the mass movements of the 1930s, transforming themselves into social movements by a renewed commitment to political education and direct action. Given neoliberalism’s determined assaults, another volcanic eruption by the people is certain. But whether or not that becomes a leap “up to freedom” will depend on the sustained work done by people’s organizations.<sup>8</sup> If, as James perceptively insisted, “a revolution is made by the revolutionary spirit of the people,” then that spirit is still alive, and will burst forth some time not too far away.<sup>9</sup> ■

## Power, Violence and the Jamaican “Shotta Don”

by Anthony Bogues

**V**IOLENCE IS PERHAPS THE SINGLE MOST discussed issue in many Anglophone Caribbean societies today. The ongoing murders in Jamaica, the 2005 spate of bomb attacks along with the sharp rise in kidnappings in Trinidad, and the growing number of persons violently killed in Guyana speak not of a mundane problem in the postcolonial Caribbean, but of a crisis we have yet to name. This crisis is also compounded by the visible absence of mass radical political will, political imagination and radical or even progressive agendas.

For us to grasp the complexities of the crisis, it helps to explore how the battle for power

operates in the different terrains outside formal institutional political authority in Jamaica. Moreover, we need to begin to grapple with violence and its relationships to power.

What the contemporary crisis may tell us about the relationship of power to violence is related to a few critical elements in the historical construction of power in Jamaican society. Racial slavery under British colonialism combined different kinds of violence: the violence of founding colonial conquest; of legitimation; and, finally, of absolute domination, in which the body of the slave was not only property but a thing, a *res*, an excluded body. Racial slavery was thus a form of domination in which power deployed technolo-

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gies of rule that targeted the slave body, its objective being not to turn human beings into subjects but into objects and things. It was the action of power on the flesh.

The abolition of racial slavery created new spaces for the ex-slave to begin a series of confrontations with other primary technologies of colonial rule in the post-emancipation period. One of these confrontations was with Christianity and the vigorous attempt to turn the ex-slave into a wage laborer and a “Christian Black.” Central to these confrontations was the emergence of what anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos has called a “logic of affliction,” which over time became an integral part of subaltern humanizing narratives about the meanings of “Black suffering” in the New World. This logic re-emerged in the political language of the Jamaican subaltern in various periods as “sufferers” (both noun and adjective). However, this is precisely one of the main features of the present crisis: the erosion and aggressive rejection of the “logic of affliction” in its various forms by many young males.

The emergence of the “modern” political moment in Jamaica silenced the practices and narratives of black nationalism. When Creole nationalism culminated in the island’s political and constitutional independence in 1962, and constructed a hegemonic ideology about Jamaicaness, Afro-Jamaican subalterns found an alternative in the politico-religious doctrines and practices of Rastafari—in which Afro-religious practices merged with an African diasporic strain of Ethiopianism. Rastafari was to play an important role in the radicalization of the early postcolonial moment, as it became the central force for radical popular cultural forms. But Rastafari was not the only source of subaltern rebellion; indeed, alongside it emerged the figure of the *Rude Bwoy*.

In a seminal essay, Jamaican writer Garth White explains, “Rude Bwoy is that person, native, who is totally disenchanted with the ruling system; who generally descended from the ‘African’ in the lower class and who is now armed with ratchets, other cutting instruments and with increasing frequency nowadays, with guns and explosives.”<sup>1</sup> Perry Henzell’s 1973 film, *The Harder They Come*, provides a visual representation of this figure. The film puts together the two male subaltern exemplars of early postcolonial resistance: the *Rude Bwoy* is embodied by Jimmy Cliff’s character “Ivan,” and the Rastafari in the figure of “Pedro,” played by Ras Daniel Hartman. Both are rebellious, but the terms of their rebellion are different. For Ivan, rebellion is captured in the song “You Can Get It If You Really Want,”



Jimmy Cliff’s album soundtrack to the 1973 cult reggae film classic, *The Harder They Come*, featured enduring anthems to the Rude Bwoy and the Rastafari as figures of postcolonial rebellion, including the songs “You Can Get It If You Really Want,” “The Harder They Come,” and “Many Rivers to Cross.”

while the Rastafari’s rebellion is captured by the stoicism of the plaintive “Many Rivers to Cross.”

Violence was an integral part of the *Rude Bwoy*’s repertoire of rebellion. However, this was not simply the violence of a “lumpenproletariat” preying upon itself and its community, but rather a strategic instrument of self-fashioning. For the *Rude Bwoy*, violence was often a means of creating and safeguarding zones of black masculinity that were at odds with the hegemonic conceptions of the Jamaican nation-state. In this way, the *Rude Bwoy* was marking out a different set of normative terms for this subaltern group’s self-conception—in particular that of a profound notion of respect.

Over time, *Rude Bwoys* developed into gang formations and became attached to the Jamaican two-party political system. But it should be noted that there was no easy slide from rebellion to accommodation, incorporation and eventual transformation of the *Rude Bwoy*. In the initial stages of this courting by the political parties, many *Rude Bwoys* expressed ideas that drew from both Rastafari doctrine and from the Cuban Revolution. The posters and iconography that typically decorated many of their small dwellings ranged from pictures of Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro to icons of the U.S. Black Power movement—as well as hammer-and-sickle symbolism. Integration into the Jamaican two-party

system was accomplished at two levels. At first, the *Rude Bwoy* became a protective force for communities that waged political war against each other. Over time they became the central figures responsible for the distribution of different forms of public works, embracing the patronage system of the two parties. Once this process was complete, the *Rude Bwoys* were transformed from postcolonial rebellious figures into political enforcers.

Although some underwent a general drift into political parties, many others kept their distance or worked through ambiguous relationships to the political parties while trying to keep alive a radical masculinity hostile to neocolonialism. Some also made links with radical urban youth groups, while others sought out relationships with members of the radical middle-class intelligentsia. A few individuals independently developed their own ideology of urban warfare, attacking banks, the island's racetrack and police officers known to consistently brutalize the communities of the urban poor.

**LOOKING BACK AT THE NATURE OF JAMAICAN POLITICAL violence**, many perplexed commentators and radical activists in Jamaican politics often wonder: How was it possible for urban and rural oppressed groups to be so divided that they ended up engaging in violence against each other? And why was class solidarity so lacking and seemingly impossible to construct? There are many possible answers, one of which resides in the ways the two-party system was able not only to construct clientelistic relationships alongside a politics of "scarce benefits," but also a politics of difference based upon one of the oldest political stratagems—the division between friends and enemies.

Politics based upon a dichotomy between friend and foe that then organizes itself into difference is required for contexts where violence is a necessary feature of political life. The especially intriguing aspect of the Jamaican case is the ability of the Jamaican two-party system to inscribe friend/foe difference onto localized geographical spaces. These differences are then reinforced by notions of belonging that are enacted through political dramaturgy—songs, color, party conferences, dances, popular music and the appropriation of the religious symbols of both Rastafari and other Afro-Jamaican religious practices. The split between friend and foe was often unequivocal and a matter of life and death. In one community in 1999, during interviews with individuals who themselves had been part of the earlier warfare or had supported it, one man told me, "Anybody who dem catch ... have to dead. You naw mek you enemy live. ... I shared

the same sentiment."<sup>2</sup> In these contexts, difference was rearticulated into reasons for war. Nobody I interviewed admitted that they were fighting for a job, a house or for any scarce benefit. Instead they spoke about party, community, self-defense and warriorhood. In the words of another resident, "We now become instead of natural African people, Laborites [Jamaican Labor Party] and PNP [People's National Party]."<sup>3</sup>

There are three forms of violence in the Jamaican context. The first is political party violence, which reached its peak in the 1980 general election in which over 800 persons died.<sup>4</sup> The second form of violence is the one of riot and revolt [See "The Jamaican Moment," p. 11]. The last is a violence that links itself to the operation of power in small geographical spaces—lanes, streets or other divisions of small communities. This violence is not an incipient force of insurgency, but rather a way of constructing rule in local communities, a form of disorder deployed to produce and create order.

Violence itself is a difficult and slippery subject. Its primary enactment, in terms of physicality and the infliction of pain, involves assaults on personhood. As a practice, violence is also about spectacle. To be effective in imposing order it must first create awe, then fear. Even though it kills or maims, its logic is not about death but about the production of order. There is a commonplace understanding of violence and its separation from power. However, if we rethink power by understanding its capacity to designate a relationship—rooted in a social context—then violence is not a means-end instrument but a logic that accompanies power.<sup>5</sup>

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How does this function in the Jamaican postcolony, and what is the relationship between violence, death and sovereignty? In much of political thought we have become accustomed to speaking about sovereignty as a form of rule, a power that is the final "arbitrary agent," independent of external influences. Indeed, this was the great political claim of the anticolonial movement and of subsequent demands for other forms of decolonization. The anticolonial movement's political claim of nation and history was a claim to sovereignty.

I want to complicate this conventional understanding by shifting away from justifiably fierce claims for national and cultural sovereignties—particularly important in the current period of globalization—and suggest a meaning in

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which individual self-fashioning becomes critical to local and micro forms of rule. In other words, to remove sovereignty from the domain of nation-state rule and apply it to the local, to the way a community constructs itself, particularly in circumstances where hegemony has collapsed. Indeed, this form of sovereignty need not be on a large scale. And since notions of belonging are integral to rule, the enactment of belonging can also operate at a micro level. With the collapse of traditional authority from above, a shift in the grounds of belonging can be seen in many urban communities in Jamaica. Reflecting on this shift, one resident observes in particularly stark terms: “There was no money, there was no food, there was no hope. Politicians had failed. They don’t see nobody to look up to, because as far as it go dem no cater for nobody . . . everything drop, every man fe himself, everybody fe dem food. So everybody pon dem own.”<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest Jamaican political parties have lost complete political control over communities, but rather that a different logic may now be at work, one that seeks to break the absolute dominance of the two-party system. It is within this space that the *Rude Bwoy* reemerges as another figure: the area leader also called a “don” in the popular vernacular. There are two types of area leaders in many communities: one type is deeply connected to the two-party political system, while the other is a semi-independent figure. It is the latter that concerns this discussion.

**IN THE JAMAICAN POSTCOLONY AFTER THE LATE 1960S,** active subaltern currents did not engage in huge rebellions or outright revolution, but mainly practiced a form of cultural guerrilla warfare, seeking to challenge the norms of citizenship and its values. In this situation the Jamaican Creole nation-state was never able to fully establish its hegemony.<sup>7</sup> This in turn meant that instead of a national narrative of citizenship and its rituals of belongings, such practices were enacted through community linkages within politically controlled parameters. Within these micro spaces today, the area leader rules.

As they emerged, many area leaders mixed Rastafari symbols with black nationalism. The “base” (as it is known in popular parlance) of the area leader is typically organized around some economic venture—a small shop, for example. Murals of Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley and Malcolm X adorn the walls. Dances are frequently held at this spot and persons from neighboring and opposite (even hostile) communities are often welcomed. The rule of the area leader functions through a set of community codes that are enforced primarily by male individuals.

Within this context violence operates through the enforcement of the code and once war breaks out between communities, warriors take up their guns and engage in firefights—often to the death. One of the striking features of young men who engage in violence is their queries to each other, asking, “how many *duppies* [ghosts] you mek?” Death is both a form of destruction and an irreversible sacrifice. But it is also a spectacle that haunts life itself; for many of the young males involved in violence, death becomes a substitute for life. In Jamaican nation-language, death is “tek life,” a spectacle that affirms their life in the absence of positive alternatives. A resident in one of these communities casually recounted:

Yu have time when every Sunday, every Saturday, you have funeral inside ya. For years you don’t have a wedding, because it is like a trend. This week Tom going bury, next week is John, so we making preparation for that funeral. People just dead, and some of we just take it like joke, and we dress up and go a de funeral. The funeral is like a fashion show. And the latest fashion go a funeral. When somebody ask you a who dead, you ask: A who?<sup>8</sup>

In such communities young males expect death as an affirmation that they have lived and the ritual of burial is marked not only by the fashion show, but also by graveside gun salutes. It should be noted that this is not a general view of the community or even of those who have engaged in violence. One young man explained to me that, over time, as he became more involved in the violence he had “no feelings at all” and “had to turn to God to seek answer due to vibes and tension.”

It would therefore seem that any radical transformation of Jamaica has to begin with the recognition that not only has Creole state hegemony collapsed, but that there is also a new form of politics in which organized communities operate outside the constitutional and juridical norms of the nation-state. This is not a situation of dual power and a prelude to revolution, because what has also collapsed is the radical subaltern self-fashioning that drew extensively from Rastafari and a politics of radical black nationalism. This collapse is reflected in the fact that the area leader is rapidly losing his dominance and is being replaced by the “shotta don,” so-named for his reliance on the gunshot.

**BOUNTY KILLER’S SONG “PETTY THIEF” IS A REMARKABLE** commentary on contemporary urban life in Jamaica. The song identifies the “petty thief” rather than the *Rude*

*Bwoy* as the predatory figure upon the urban community. It is a song that marks the complete transition of a postcolonial rebel figure into a commanding figure of vengeance. This vengeance of the “shotta don” is one that seeks both to destroy and enter mainstream Jamaican society. It seems that three episodes were central to the formation of this figure of the “shotta don,” episodes that run counter to the conventional story (which locates this figure solely within the realm of a vibrant drug economy): the collapse of two peace processes that sought to end political warfare, the defeat and then collapse of left and reformist projects after the 1980 elections and the global and national consolidation of neoliberalism as the only ideological framework for organizing human society.



A road block was set up by residents of Spanish Town, Jamaica, on Dec. 1, 2005, in response to the killing of a local businessman by police.

In the aftermath of the Green Bay massacre of 1978, in which members of the Jamaica Defense Force gunned down five gang members, political enforcers from both political parties organized a peace treaty. The two major figures in this peace effort were Claude Massop, from Tivoli Gardens—the main Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) stronghold in the western end of Kingston—and Aston “Bucky” Thompson from the People’s National Party (PNP). The peace treaty was warmly welcomed by many of the political enforcers and had the backing of prominent individuals, notably Bob Marley. The peace process had been organized and managed by a council that met regularly at the Ambassador Theatre in West Kingston. Its advocates demanded a program of public works for the unemployed male youths of urban Kingston. At one of the support rallies, one speaker stated, “Unity wonderful, but we want better housing, better living standard for all people whether JLP or PNP. We cannot allow politicians to come into West Kingston and divide the youths anymore. The situation must remedy.”<sup>9</sup> Individuals close to the process have pointed out that many of the discussions at the Ambassador Theatre centered on the possibility of a new political party of Rastafari that would be funded with Marley’s money. However, the peace process was buried with the ambush killing by the Jamaican military of Massop in Jamaica and with Thompson’s murder in New York.

Some of the individuals who attended the different peace council meetings recalled to me both its promise and its example. In 1999, some of these figures made a second attempt to secure peace in many poor urban communities. However, if the first peace treaty was driven by a desire for unity in the face of certain death by the state

forces, the second was driven by other elements: the economic activities of individuals who had used their position as political enforcers to garner state resources, and a growing feeling in many urban communities that violence had taken its toll.

The second peace process was not as centralized as the first. There was no central advisory council, although various attempts were made to pull the leadership of communities together into a combined peace movement. Wherever peace was declared because of the exhaustion of a community, criminal activity declined—including rape and what was called “petty thieving.”<sup>10</sup> In such spaces, forums of community justice emerged. These forums were sometimes organized to include individuals who were seen either as elders or as commanding some amount of respect. Again, elements of black nationalist ideas and Rastafari were used to undergird declarations of unity and peace.

In one community this process allowed for the emergence of classes in black radical history and the development of a literacy program. But this newfound calm was everywhere unstable. As militant reggae star Peter Tosh foretold at a concert in 1978, without justice there would be no peace.

The second effort at peace collapsed for two reasons. The first was the inability of the peacemakers to provide economic development in the communities. The second was the emergence of a generation of young male “shottas” who did not buy into either of the two central ideological forces of radical subaltern Afro-Jamaica: Rastafari or Black nationalism. These “shottas” challenged many area leaders, themselves becoming dons and predators. It is the emer-

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gence of this latest avenging figure that is a revealing sign of the crisis—a figure who does not seek to explain and understand his social location by references to any logic of “black suffering.” For the “shotta don” the Jamaican postcolony is itself a predatory state, and contestations rooted in subaltern rebellious cultures have all failed. There is only one way out: accumulate enough capital through extortion, government contracts or the haulage business, then use these resources to influence the formal two-party system.

The Jamaican postcolony therefore faces a unique situation. Not only is there no hegemony from the rulers, but subaltern radical counter-hegemony itself has also collapsed or has diminished in influence. In such a context politics takes on different dimensions. The “shotta

don” becomes the area leader and establishes rule in communities often by the force of death. In such circumstances, death is not a rupture but a norm to be deployed, with arbitrary violence foreclosing all possibilities. Rule, therefore, is about the absolute power of death. Violence, too, must now be especially brutal and rape has become a regular feature of violent attacks.

The contemporary nature of violence in Jamaican society is the mark of a profound crisis in the Jamaican postcolony. It is not a crisis that can be named by recourse to discourses about a lack of values and attitudes, or by nostalgic musings about better times past. Thinking through the current Jamaican crisis requires coming to grips with new forms of power and their expression in the current postcolonial moment. ■

## Remapping Caribbean Geopolitics

by Diana Thorburn

A SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY JET FILLED WITH arms bound for Haiti was grounded in Jamaica in February 2004 because the intended recipient of the shipment, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was no longer in the country. The incident provided a delicious and ironic symbol of the stark changes in Caribbean diplomacy and its external political relations and represented a stunning reversal of 30 years ago, when at the height of the Cold War, Cuban military planes touched down in Jamaica on their way to southern Africa. The Cuban forces with their matériel not only reached their intended destination, but also enjoyed tremendous and surprising success as they turned the Angolan civil war around by helping defeat U.S.-backed mercenaries and apartheid-era South African elite troops, ensuring victory for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

This twist of historical precedence comes amid other intriguing developments in the changing diplomatic and political arena in which the Caribbean now finds itself. Indeed, Haiti could be seen to provide the fulcrum for what appears to be a wave of new international political dynamics in the region. Although Washington’s purported involvement appears to be a repetition of a familiar interventionist pattern, a close examination of developments in the wake of Aristide’s downfall reveals a pronounced shift in the regular trajectory of U.S.-Caribbean relations. These include emerging powers seeking influence in the region and regional leaders in search of new international interlocutors—particularly given their indignation over the Haitian situation—all in the context of a hegemon that at the extreme might be on the decline, and at minimum is distracted elsewhere in the world.

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