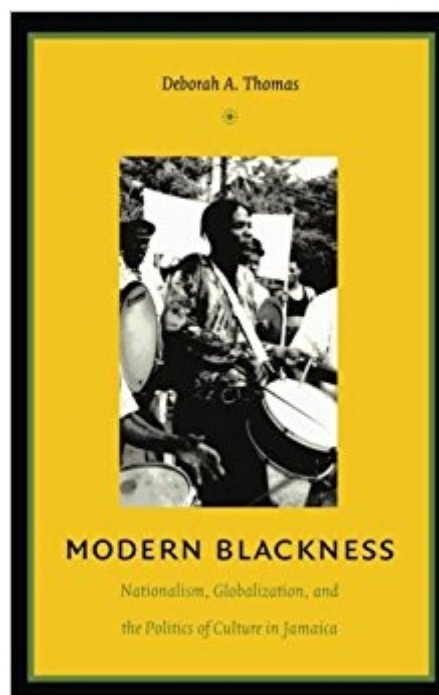




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Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, And The Politics Of Culture In Jamaica (Latin America Otherwise)



Synopsis

Modern Blackness is a rich ethnographic exploration of Jamaican identity in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. Analyzing nationalism, popular culture, and political economy in relation to one another, Deborah A. Thomas illuminates an ongoing struggle in Jamaica between the values associated with the postcolonial state and those generated in and through popular culture. Following independence in 1962, cultural and political policies in Jamaica were geared toward the development of a multiracial creole nationalism reflected in the country's motto: "Out of many, one people." As Thomas shows, by the late 1990s, creole nationalism was superseded by "modern blackness"—an urban blackness rooted in youth culture and influenced by African American popular culture. Expressions of blackness that had been marginalized in national cultural policy became paramount in contemporary understandings of what it was to be Jamaican. Thomas combines historical research with fieldwork she conducted in Jamaica between 1993 and 2003. Drawing on her research in a rural hillside community just outside Kingston, she looks at how Jamaicans interpreted and reproduced or transformed on the local level nationalist policies and popular ideologies about progress. With detailed descriptions of daily life in Jamaica set against a backdrop of postcolonial nation-building and neoliberal globalization, *Modern Blackness* is an important examination of the competing identities that mobilize Jamaicans locally and represent them internationally.

Book Information

Series: Latin America Otherwise

Paperback: 376 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press Books (November 29, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822334194

ISBN-13: 978-0822334194

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,169,301 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #59 in Books > History > Americas > Caribbean & West Indies > Jamaica #287 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Cultural Policy #760 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Nationalism

Customer Reviews

“Modern Blackness is an important book. It is well written, it puts forth a creative theoretical apparatus, and it displays Deborah A. Thomas’s keen ethnographic eye. It is on a topic of extreme importance to the discipline of anthropology as well as to African diaspora and Caribbean and Latin American studies, engaging as it does some of the effects of neoliberalism and structural adjustment in today’s world.”—Kevin A. Yelvington, author of *Producing Power: Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in a Caribbean Workplace*

“In its critique of creole respectability, *Modern Blackness* challenges established views of Jamaican nationalism and the nation-state. Deborah A. Thomas argues that the young and black who live in Kingston have forged social values and transnational links that reflect their disillusion with education and aspirations to the middle class. She confronts the reader with the reality of life among the lower sets and provides a provocative agenda for rethinking blackness.”—Diane Austin-Broos, author of *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*

“‘Modern Blackness’ is an important book. It is well written, it puts forth a creative theoretical apparatus, and it displays Deborah A. Thomas’s keen ethnographic eye. It is on a topic of extreme importance to the discipline of anthropology as well as to African diaspora and Caribbean and Latin American studies, engaging as it does some of the effects of neoliberalism and structural adjustment in today’s world.”—Kevin A. Yelvington, author of “*Producing Power: Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in a Caribbean Workplace*”

Deborah A. Thomas is a cartographer of culture who maps the topography of Jamaican culture through time, across class, between urban and rural locales, and over a variety political landscapes. What emerges from her work is a detailed analysis of the various contours of culture that follow the shifting fault lines of Jamaica’s political economy. Deborah Thomas has written a beautiful ethnography. Central to her analysis are several questions: what does it mean to be Jamaican? what role does culture play for a black and brown nation? and, what role does a black and brown nation play in shaping Jamaica’s culture? Dr. Thomas frames her important study by documenting the way a multi-racial creole culture was significantly eclipsed, during the late 1990s, by a culture of blackness forged in modernity but produced and re-produced in decidedly post-modern ways. Aligning this shift with shifts in the global economy, she ‘reads’ these changes through a variety of performances. Some of the performances she explores explicitly claim to represent Jamaica’s national culture, but other performances she describes explicitly claim to counter notions of

respectability to represent a sort of in-your-face booty grinding blackness, which ends up emerging as the cultural practices of the nation's people. Thomas brilliantly illustrates how culture, nation, and the ideology of progress are implicated in an understanding of what blackness and Jamaican identity actually mean in various contexts. As she notes, "context is everything" and she takes the reader inside a variety of institutions that seek to define and redefine both race and culture in turn-of-the-century Jamaica. This approach is refreshing. She not only identifies structural entities that dictates cultural policy in Jamaica, but she identifies the agents within those structures, actually putting a name to both the powerful and the powerless, who constantly jostle over who gets to claim and name what constitutes Jamaican culture. From the organized and powerful National Dance Theater Company to the unorganized and entertaining "roots" theater performances, she allows the reader to experience the way the participants (dancers/actors and audience) perform, respond, and contest ideologies of race, nation, and progress. She does not stop there, however, weddings and dance hall session, movies and newspaper clippings are each scrutinized in an effort to buttress her argument that the multi-racial creole nationalism is waning as a modern blackness tied to the global economy waxes and the meaning of what it means to be Jamaican hangs in the balance. Deborah Thomas has written a bold, refreshing, and powerful ethnography that grapples with some of the most sticky theoretical issues in contemporary theory today -- blackness, globalization, modernity, and the idea progress.

"Feel the rhythm, feel the rhyme, gear on up, it's bobsled time!" This quote from the all-too forgettable movie *Cool Runnings* about a team of Jamaicans that made it to the Olympics accentuates how music becomes a part of the transnational Jamaican identity through global popular culture. An association to identity, such as music, reflects what Deborah Thomas refers to as "modern blackness," which has superceded the postcolonial identity of a creole nation with the motto "Out of many, one people." By ethnographically exploring Jamaican nationalism from the end of the 19th century to the present, Thomas sorts out the complex effects of colonialism and globalization on inequalities of race, class, and gender in her inspiring work *Modern Blackness*. Cultural practices, such as reggae, which were developed by lower class Jamaicans are unrecognized as part of the broader national identity. Deborah Thomas structure's the text in an interesting way by outlining the relationships between the global-national, national-local, and local-global. By contextualizing the evolution of Jamaican identity, Thomas' argument flows from historical perspective during the "Crown Colony rule" to a contemporary understanding that effectively "clarifies the links between global processes, nationalist visions, and local practices (p.

31, then 19)." The capstone of her fieldwork is in Mango Mount where she uncovers the culture being shaped under neoliberal policies that continue to economically restrain the community. The diasporal feeling of nationalism before Jamaica's independence from Britain in 1962 is based on the ongoing struggle of asserting an identity of the "respectable state." The early works by black Jamaicans such as Jamaica's Jubilee highlight their attempt to prove advancements in the black community, both morally and culturally. Asserting various aspects of Jamaicanness was an effort to unite one people with values held by the middle-class. Thomas posits, "As black intellectuals, the Jubilee writers insisted that they articulated important mass concerns on the basis of their shared blackness, but they distanced themselves from lower-class blacks and African-derived cultural expressions (pg. 48)." Jamaican pride was racially characterized through forms of artistic expression and reflections of Creole multiracialism. The author adds that this identity "more closely resembled classical European nationalism (which) was founded on a concept of common history and culture rather than race and, as in Europe, obscured the conflation of class with race (pg. 55)." By embracing Jamaican heritage, the country demarcated themselves from historical representations of Africanness, as well as the practices of the poorer urban class. This reflected the attitudes of many previously enslaved individuals coming from rural areas with "values" and "respectable" culture. Thomas argues that references to "values" emulate the history of colonialism and reinvent the inequalities of power and class. The national-local relationship is displayed by the author through the cultural politics of a tiny village with the fictitious name Mango Mount, just outside of Kingston. Throughout the end of the twentieth century, the leadership of the national government followed global economic policies through democracy and capitalism; therefore disconnecting themselves from the indigenous localities, one of which is Mango Mount. Thomas explains, "It has remained difficult for many Jamaicans to sustain the imagination of a community whose primary political, economic, and sociocultural institutions have been developed by black lower-class Jamaicans (pg. 91)." In her work in Mango Mount, the author demonstrates the practices that distinguish lower-class and local youth culture as forthcoming in flamboyant ways, especially during celebrations in the town square. The square becomes a noisy dancehall that is routinely scrutinized by middle-class residences. Thomas describes her experience and the comments of a participant in the following way: "Rhythm and blues and reggae gave way to hardcore dancehall toward the wee hours of the morning...and (unfortunately) were never as good as in other communities because the "rich people" would always call the police to 'lock down the music' because 'dem nuh like fi see wi do wha we a do' (pg. 114)." Although I do not understand exactly what this Jamaican was trying to express, it is valid to see how the shift to youthful urban blackness has been influenced by

American popular culture and has redefined what it means to be "very, very, Jamaican." The ordinary lower class is challenging the previously held Afro-Jamaican identities of their postemancipation history. Thomas justifies these contradicting attitudes by stating, "Their worlds were increasingly urban and transnational and because they had apprehended the fundamental disjuncture between political and economic development strategies and cultural development initiatives they had to (look back, take pride, but move forward) (pg. 190)." Moving forward has caused a transition of political hegemony and has been characterized by activism and agency at the local level. The racialized version of nationalism, which excluded urban culture, is now personified as contemporary 'modern blackness'. Distinctions are being made between definitions of black and brown, as well as what constitutes Africanness and Blackness. Thomas adds, "If consciousness of an African heritage operated primarily on a symbolic level, even within popular expressive culture, racial consciousness was continually through day to day experiences of color prejudice and discrimination, both in Jamaica and abroad (pg. 183)." The relationship between local and international now bypasses state efforts that hold identities of British imperialism and further define Jamaicanness in terms of globalization and popular style. Thomas focuses on the influences of America on Jamaican culture, as well as Jamaica's ability to influence American culture. The irony of this "two-way process" is the size of Jamaica as a country and their power to impose Jamaicanness globally. The author states, "The frequency of these invocations also suggests a need to carve out spaces in which Jamaicans feel, and indeed have, power and recognition within a global public sphere (pg. 250)." Many Jamaican immigrants have spread this power and presented future possibilities for 'moving ahead.' Deborah Thomas' work is important in understanding the lasting effects of colonial rule, as well as the changing socio-political climates of globalization. What is clear is that Jamaicanness is not American, European, African, black, white, or brown. It is its own evolving identity that has become shaped by all these identities within the global environment. Finally, Modern Blackness presents possibilities for change and improvement where dreams become realized in the context of Jamaica's future.

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