Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica. By Deborah Thomas. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 376 pp.

Modern Blackness is a beautiful ethnographic study in which Deborah Thomas explores the cultural politics of competing nationalist identities in Jamaica. Thomas's core intervention seeks to counter presumptions of homogeneity across the diaspora, or as she states in *Modern Blackness*, those diasporic discussions that have a "tendency to privilege similarity, or unity, among African diasporic populations rather than difference, disunity, and asymmetry" (25). Thomas summons informant community members from the hillside country of "Mango Mount" to help provoke a deeper discussion of competing nationalist identities. One layer of Thomas's argument asserts that although post-colonial elites tried to stabilize cultural politics by institutionalizing traditions and constructing value systems that were "associated with the rural peasantry," their preoccupation with "respectability," for example, overlooked an ever developing notion of "Jamaicanness" that was not bound by territory, skin color, or even by the traditions and cultural products passed down generation to generation. Thomas argues succinctly in *Modern Blackness* that post-colonial, elite, Black leaders and state institutions have placed too much emphasis on values (e.g., "respectability," "progress," and "development") that are intended to mark an authentic Jamaicanness in the name of nationalism. More concerned with the ways in which new labor markets and global economies open doors for the subaltern to help shape new forms of subjectivities and Caribbean identities, Thomas defines "modern blackness" as that precise tension between post-colonial notions of Jamaicanness and the reality of a more dynamic, more transnational Jamaican identity.

Thomas argues that "modern blackness is a subaltern aesthetic and politics; a bracketed blackness that continually deconstructs [the power relations] that are often erased within the Creole [nationalist] formulation" (13). The Mango Mount interviewees offer readers a glimpse of how tensions between culture or tradition and nationalism are persistent and irresolvable, and not at all homogeneous. Mango Mount is a community of people of various classes and skin colors who struggle to reconcile nationalist expectations of Black respectability with current economic realities. Mango Mount community members reveal popular reactions to national or state discourses on Jamaican political and economic progress throughout Thomas's text. The interviewees also express how post-colonial ideas and values are expected to be reproduced, supported, and even performed via various public institutions. Finally, Mango Mount informants demonstrate a cognizance regarding the irreconcilable tension between state initiatives to define Jamaicanness and a more dynamic definition of progress, development, and community that requires understanding one's place in the larger geopolitical context.

Although *Modern Blackness* works to explain elite or state-established definitions of "progress" and "development" from the particular lens of the subaltern, Thomas does successfully offer "institutional" historical context along with her informants' perspectives. Specifically, she outlines various historical moments of Jamaican post-colonial elite preoccupation with "respectability" and the development of a Jamaican ethos. Still, *Modern Blackness* is most concerned with members of communities like Mango Mount, who struggle to reconcile nationalist expectations of Black respectability with their current, often bleak, economic realities. Better than anyone, the subaltern, Thomas suggests, possess an understanding of Jamaican nationalism that is more dynamic, and no doubt more useful to them because it is a

result of their lived national/local experiences. She argues that their lived experiences bind them to a distinctively Jamaican vision of themselves as they are a people cognizant of their "disillusionment with middle class nationalism... [and how] it impact[s] the extent to which economic self-determination [can] be enjoyed by all" (211).

Thomas's work reveals a present-day Jamaica in which "Jamaicanness" and "culture" are fluid, complex, and incomplete due to the demands of the marketplace. She further suggests that Jamaican nationalism is not contingent on "tradition," "heritage," or even "place." Instead, Thomas successfully argues that a lack of grassroots buy-in to a traditional Jamaican nationalism, or even Black nationalism, in fact opens the door to a current definition of "blackness" that is eminently subaltern and modernist, radically and unapologetically consumerist, individualist in the capitalist context, and driven by the demands of the national/local market.

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