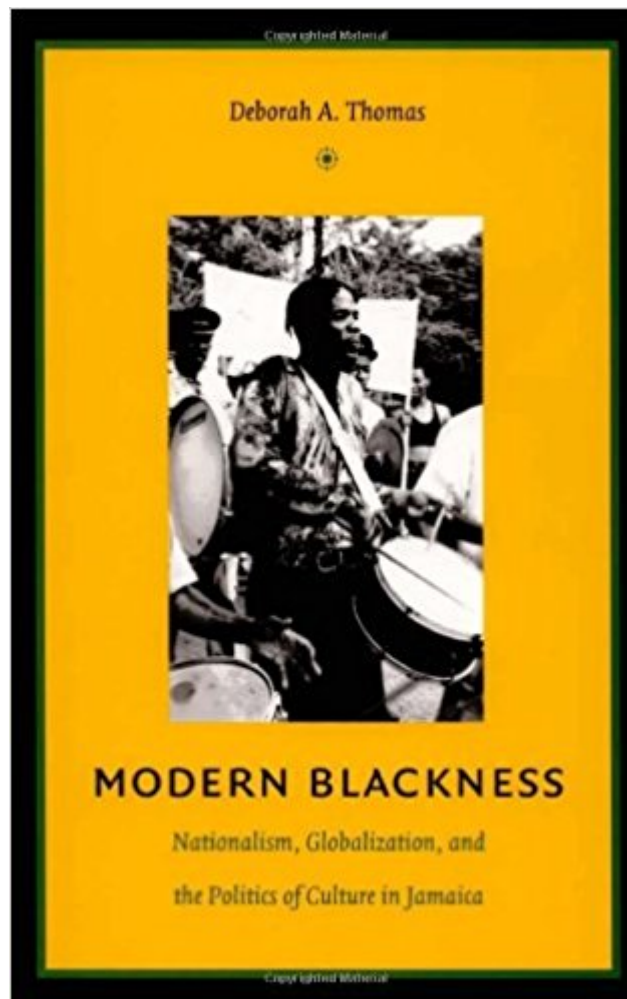


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Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, And The Politics Of Culture In Jamaica (Latin America Otherwise)



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 As Thomas shows, by the late 1990s, creole nationalism was superseded by "modern blackness" – an urban blackness rooted in youth culture and influenced by African American popular culture.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.

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Customer Reviews

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 of 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.

"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 superseded 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 structures 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."

Forget your troubles and dance! Forget your sorrows and dance! Forget your sickness and dance! Forget your weakness and dance! Lyrics to Them Belly Full (But We Hungry). (1974)
Composed by Legon Cogill and Carlton Barrett. Bob Marley's music helped define a generation of Jamaican culture through reggae. In *Modern Blackness*, Deborah Thomas proposes that the reggae "soundtrack" for Jamaica has been succeeded by dancehall, just as cultural identity has evolved to fit a new vision of blackness. She suggests that the "modern blackness of late-twentieth century. . . is urban, migratory, based in youth-oriented popular culture, and influenced by African American popular style" (p. 229). Thomas also asserts that black identity in Jamaica is not post-modern, which suggests a break with the past, rather connected to the development of an identity rooted in the local and historical yet dependent on national and transnational pressures. Thomas explores modern blackness by dissecting these influences on culture in Jamaica. She breaks her analysis into three sections: the global-national, the national-local, and the local-global. This separation allows for a critical analysis of the various influences while displaying both the connections and dissonances. In order to guide her analysis of modern blackness in Jamaica, Thomas uses two years of ethnographic research conducted between 1993 and 2003. In this book, she brings us to a real community outside Kingston, fictitiously named Mango Mount, as a means of illustrating the concepts of modern blackness on a local community.

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