



Caribbean Quarterly

A Journal of Caribbean Culture

ISSN: 0008-6495 (Print) 2470-6302 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcbq20>

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To cite this article: Dylan Kerrigan & Paula Morgan (2020) Introduction: Crime in Selected Caribbean Territories Culture and Representation, Caribbean Quarterly, 66:2, 169-176

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2020.1759226>



Published online: 20 May 2020.



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INTRODUCTION

Crime in Selected Caribbean Territories

Culture and Representation

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GUEST EDITORS

THE IMPACT, PERVASIVENESS AND INTRACTABILITY OF CRIME have become urgent everyday concerns for residents and researchers of the Caribbean. This special issue of *Caribbean Quarterly* (CQ) probes representations of crime in Caribbean fiction, language, history, popular culture and ethics to help us better understand how and why crime functions structurally and as social action across Caribbean worlds today. Crime in the Caribbean is a longstanding, complex social problem with psychosocial consequences, extending from the imperial white-collar crimes and genocide perpetrated by Western elites during slavery and colonialism to the rampant murder, gender-based violence and corruption in the present neo-colonial era. Understanding crime via humanistic, historical, cultural, and political representations helps readers in both cognitive and experiential terms. The insights articulated by the authors of this special issue heighten our capacity to empathise and contextualise how crime, as an enduring social structure and as a consequence and catalyst of regional trauma, impacts and shapes the quality of Caribbean life experiences.

Applying diverse lenses of anthropology, linguistics, literary analysis, social history and cultural studies, the contributors mine personal narratives, interviews, popular cultural forms, literary texts, media discourses, state and judicial statements. Together they interrogate issues such as: what accounts for pervasive cultures and the intergenerational persistence of crime? What is the impact of a retributive system of justice on society? How can the concept of reparation, which provides a different epistemology to think about or to envision justice, help us to better understand that violence not only destroys but also generates new senses of dimension, new ideas about community and

new notions of participation? How do unrelieved historical, national and cultural traumas drill down into the lives of individuals, families and communities? How do the culture and the practice of crime shape social knowledge and language use among crime brokers, as they transmit ideologies about their own lives in conversation? How has the postcolonial state dealt with whistleblowers and white-collar crime? The conceptualisation of this special issue originated with Dr Lucy Evans of the University of Leicester who, along with Professor Anthony Harriott of the University of the West Indies, Mona, led the three-year-long interdisciplinary project and scholarly network, “Crime and Its Representation in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1834–2018”, funded by the British Academy.¹ We were both participants at the international workshops of this network which met in Leicester, UK in 2016; Mona, Jamaica in 2017; and St Augustine, Trinidad in 2018. Dr Evans’s proposal, with the support from *Caribbean Quarterly*, to showcase this genre of scholarship within the region brought the editors of this special issue and its contributors together. The compilation illustrates how increased dialogue between social science and humanities scholars concerned with the criminological brings new insights and spaces to think through the larger problem of crime, social action and cultural function in the Caribbean.

As is often the case, a compilation stands to be circumscribed by responses to the call for papers. In actuality, this volume both falls short and exceeds the originally conceived ambit. The majority of the essays in this special issue deal with Trinidad and Tobago, with contributions on Jamaica, Guyana, and one that deals with Trinidad alongside Haiti and Guadeloupe; as such the issue does not extend to the Hispanic or Dutch Caribbean. Nonetheless, we suggest the volume, as timely, valuable and relevant to the entire region as it may be, points to a pressing need for systematic research and publications which cover crime, culture and representation in the entire fluid and interconnected Caribbean region, in all of its social and cultural diversity and language groups.

Over the last five years, scholarship in the field of anglophone Caribbean criminology, criminal justice and crime has started to find a strong foothold, as various recent edited collections suggest. Wendell Wallace’s 2019 collection *Caribbean Perspectives on Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Volume 1² is a good example of this trend.³ Similar to this current issue of *CQ*, last year’s special issue of the journal *Caribbean Criminology*, “Caribbean Feminist Crim-

inology”⁴ edited by Lucy Evans and Dylan Kerrigan, also brought together humanities and social science authors from across the region and beyond.

Due to the myriad ways crime is connected transhistorically and via social structures to the experiences of everyday cultures in the Caribbean, there has always been a rich vein of research beyond the field of criminology which engages with the study of crime in the Caribbean. This was something the pioneers of Caribbean criminology, such as Ken Pryce and Maureen Cain, called for in their discussions of a holistic approach to crime in the Caribbean.⁵ They recognised the connections between culture, history and socioeconomic factors, and the need for historians, cultural studies researchers, anthropologists and literary critics to weigh in on the study of crime in the region.⁶

It is ineffective to seek to understand crime simply as the action of the individual without context and history; without understanding the relationship between social structures and social action; without acknowledging the relationship between socioeconomic environment and culture, and how everyday Caribbean worlds shape and interact with the choices individuals make. To limit crime research in this way is to erase Caribbean collective memory. This is not to say that individuals are not responsible for their actions and should not bear consequences for causing injury or damage; rather, it is to remind us that cultures of criminality are human responses to social events and environments, and we should fight any ideology or amnesia that masks this connection. As Daniel Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong note, “The way we think about crime is inadequate. By defining crime as lawbreaking and then concentrating on the resulting adversarial relationship between government and the criminal offender, we fail to address – or even recognise – certain fundamental reasons for, and results of, criminal behaviour.”⁷

As such, in the interest of promoting social change and development, if we want to understand crime beyond punishment and retribution, but also as the outcome of what some humans will do in certain circumstances, we need to gain insight and understanding about the how’s and why’s of human action. This requires the input of the humanities working with the social sciences, transcending disciplinary boundaries to provide insights into human behaviour that connect knowledge of Caribbean collective memory and cultures to the study of crime.

The articles in this special issue all contribute to this intellectual endeavour and to the development of both Caribbean criminology and a broader

connection to the study of crime beyond one single disciplinary silo. They also extend a qualitative analysis of crime at a time of an “unwarranted and unhealthy level of dominance”⁸ of survey instruments in the measurement of crime. Rather than including a focus on the quality of people’s life experiences, those trying to understand and intervene in crime since the 1990s have tended to prioritise the quantity, the measured levels, of crime. While these studies are, of course, important and necessary, the discourses they produce are limited and lack holism and, as such, often feed penal populism,⁹ reactive securitisation discourses,¹⁰ and an othering logic between different social classes in society similar to apartheid.¹¹ Globally, not just in the Caribbean, these epistemological realities have been manipulated into a never-ending war on crime that stands in need of alternative approaches. Such alternative approaches will require the deliberative, localised and specific thinking of qualitative insights, alongside measurement and quantification, to produce a better understanding of crime and justice. Such qualitative insights are the type of thinking the articles in this special issue seek to provide.

The criminal acts and originary violations at the bedrock of the modern Caribbean social order are an appropriate point at which to initiate this enquiry. In “‘Not Fit to Be Mentioned’: Ghosts and Narratives of Criminal Intimacies in Selected Short Stories from *The Haunted Tropics: Caribbean Ghost Stories*”, Hannah Regis argues that Caribbean histories of genocide, exploitation and displacement have called up haunting, spectral presences which function as repositories of troubled cultural memories. These spirit presences which manifest in three stories based in Trinidad and Guadeloupe, from Martin Munro’s edited collection, are seeking redress for deep-rooted, often unarticulated societal woundedness which generates contemporary acts of violence and schism in the post-colony along axes of race, gender and nation. The raced and displaced body becomes an index of exploitation. Regis argues that attention to Caribbean narratives of spectrality trouble monolithic modes of reading society and destabilise received notions of being in a manner that can facilitate therapeutic intervention and restorative justice.

In “Bobol as a Transhistorical Cultural Logic: The Coloniality of Corruption in Trinidad”, Dylan Kerrigan explores a commonly practised form of sociopolitical power in Trinidad and Tobago labelled as “bobol”. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews, newspaper stories, and calypso lyrics – alongside participant observation and contextual cultural analysis – the essay

traces perceptions of bobol across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to suggest how its discourse and practice interface with race and class-based inequities and have become “embedded syncretically within the logic of post-colonial institutions and contemporary daily culture”. It argues that unearthing an analysis of submerged continuities and cultural logics between colonial and neo-colonial eras can provide groundwork for intervention into broad-based and destructive societal practices of banal corruption which have become normative.

Conflict between nationalistic ideals and ideologies and continuities of white-collar crime in newly independent Trinidad and Tobago is the theme of Renee Cozier’s “Play Gene Miles! White-collar Crime, Whistleblowing and Popular Culture in Trinidad”. Cozier explores the diverse ways in which Miles, civil servant and PNM-party activist, challenged hierarchical structures based on patriarchy, party loyalty, colour, gender, and class in her determination to stand for good governance, ethics and integrity in public life. The enquiry also explores how cultural discourses inspired by her life and expressed through Carnival masquerade, calypso, dramatic performance and poetry have encapsulated broad-based responses to her stance and subsequently laid the groundwork for collective memorialisation. Until today Gene Miles has become iconic of the courage required, the institutional resistance and the exorbitant cost of exposing white-collar crime in postcolonial Trinidad and Tobago.


There has been a rising scourge of gang warfare in several Caribbean territories. In “‘Killing Don’t Need No Reason’: Trauma and Criminality in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*”, Paula Morgan explores the question of “how to alleviate the scourge of gang violence which, particularly when imbricated with political processes, devastates individuals, families, communities and nations and spreads its tentacles transnationally and transgenerationally”. Based on an application of trauma theory to qualitative close reading, this essay unearths connections between criminality and silenced, submerged unresolved traumas on multiple levels in Marlon James’s award-winning novel set in Kingston, Jamaica. In the process, it argues for an understanding of individual, collective and apparently random criminal behaviours as eruptions of the out-workings of historical, national and transnational, cultural and insidious traumas which drill down into the lives of individuals, families and communities. This enquiry argues that effective intervention

must therefore excavate and address these rhizomes, while addressing more immediate individual and societal conditions.

“‘Doh Go Dey’: Crime in Conversations with Gang Members in Trinidad and Tobago”, by Renée Figuera, uses the analysis of discourse and conversation to explore agency among gang players who self-identify as “community leaders”. With a focus on linguistic expression of agency defined as “the socioculturally mediated capacity and right to act [out crime]”, Figuera interrogates conversational cues, language use, memories, experiences, and communal practices of six players, who were part of a community gang network. Building on existing insight into the political ethnography of clientelism in garrison communities, this analysis reveals the complex, contested dynamic between “cultures of control (control agencies’ downwards symbolic constructions) and cultures of deviance (rule breakers’ upwards counter-constructions)”. The author explores patterns of agency in terms of ways of talking about a life of crime as frames of identity in common, and as conversational strategies that affirm criminality as a community praxis.

Danielle Watson and Paula Morgan take on a related task in “‘Criminals, Taliban, Terrorists, Murderers’: Community Perceptions of Police in a Crime Hotspot in Trinidad”. Based on forty interviews with residents of a crime “hotspot” who had been engaged in police/civilian interactions, this enquiry argues that quite apart from a generalised fear of crime in Trinidad and Tobago, additional insecurities are created by a prevailing mistrust of local police officers, compounded by eyewitness accounts of illicit police activities, which has led to the construction of the police as the “real criminals”, resulting in the deployment of complex discursive strategies reflective of more or less active resistance and power haggling. Perceptions about what accounts for crime and criminality have the potential to significantly impact on how law enforcers engage with “criminal elements” and, in turn, how individuals so labelled interact with law enforcers. These multigenerational hostilities constitute a severe challenge to police authority at the community level and feed the ongoing police civilian warfare. The article’s assertion of the high levels of risk involved in living in “hotspot” communities was painfully demonstrated by the fact that of the forty persons between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five who were interviewed in 2013 for this research project, only seven remained alive at the time of writing, a mere six years later.

Finally, drawing from the literary representation and philosophical thought of Wilson Harris, Darin Gibson sounds a positive note, which is a fitting way to bring this issue to a close. In “A Conflict of Values: The Potentialities of Retributive and Restorative Paradigms in Wilson Harris’s *The Whole Armour*”, Gibson explores the impact of systems of retributive justice on social orders. Focusing on Harris’s Guyana-based novel, he posits that a focus on blame and an overt or covert thirst for vengeance create an unhealthy psycho-emotional response to crime and punishment. He argues for substituting a belief in the morality of revenge that can readily become institutionalised and culturally entrenched with judicial processes which are executed in the spirit of jurisprudence, tinged with compassion and aimed at restoration. This he envisions as pivotal for the psychological wellbeing of the national and regional community.

Sociocultural insights and transhistorical context provide added information to problematise the assumptions and perceptions that dominate a society’s perception of crime and criminal behaviour.¹² In the ongoing battle against high levels of crime in the Caribbean and the destruction it causes to the social fabric of the region, crime and its representation are an important aspect in the knowledge production needed to better understand and treat with the structural and transhistorical reality of crime. We believe the articles in this issue provide examples of the penetrative insights an interdisciplinary approach brings to the study and understanding of crime in the Caribbean. 

NOTES

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