



Jovan Scott Lewis, *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0998-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5179-0997-0 (cloth)

There are three things that I like about this book; its originality, its intellectual contribution to several scholarly debates across multiple disciplinary domains, and the richness of the ethnography that Jovan Lewis draws on. Focusing on the phenomenon of the rise of the scamming economy in Jamaica, Lewis shares the perspectives of young men who work within this industry in order to understand the context, and the motivation for their engagement in this criminalized form of income generation. Drawing on anti-colonial and decolonial political economy debates, the book juxtaposes issues – entrepreneurialism/criminality; sovereignty/reparations; Blackness/sufferation – to explore young people's agency in the context of shrinking available life spaces as well as the urgent repair needed to secure Caribbean futures. In this respect, this monograph makes an important contribution. It offers a refreshingly new perspective on the contemporary Caribbean and makes important connections between the changing structures of racial capitalism and the dynamic agency that poor people exercise in order to negotiate the spaces of survival left open to the region in the wake of 30 years of free market fundamentalism. *Scammer's Yard* raises unsettling questions of fairness in a world economy that subjects Jamaicans to durative forms of poverty, and that demands adherence to modes of market discipline that exacerbate the patterns of inequality and dispossession rooted in the violence of the racializing logic of the plantation system and in the ongoing racializing logic of capitalism itself.

It is easy to get carried away by the sensationalism of scamming and focus only on the distress that this form of dispossession imposes on vulnerable victims. Indeed, much of the opening passages of the book is devoted to explaining the author's research methods and measures taken not to be incriminated by the research itself. But this book is about so much more

than scamming economies; it offers a sobering analysis of the overlapping spaces and scales of capitalist extraction and exploitation that have trapped poor Black Jamaicans in webs of despair since time immemorial – webs that scamming disrupts if only fleetingly, and if only for a tiny few.

The monograph is a page turner, made possible by the fluidity and clarity of Lewis’ writing style and the subject matter itself. The combination of rich quotations, the liberal use of musical lyrics, and the range of issues covered has produced a book that will be of interest to multiple communities of scholars. Reminiscent of Laurie Gunst’s (1995) book, *Born Fi’ Dead*, but with much more theoretical sophistication, this book offers more than an insight into the inner workings of scamming economies. Rather, and unlike any other book that I am aware of, this monograph brings together a focus on the grey economy, the racializing dispossessive logic of capitalism, and, importantly, the question of repair.

The richness of the ethnography is as gratifying as Lewis’ deft blending of the empirical data and conceptual framework. The text moves seamlessly between sections with complex discussions such as the relationship between technological infrastructure and market making or the role of ethical frameworks in the making of scammer markets and supporting ethnographic narratives or quotations from scholarly sources that integrate and render intelligible the broad argument that Lewis makes. That Lewis is able to do all this in language that is clear and devoid of unnecessary jargon is a masterful feat that sets his book apart.

The introduction offers a detailed discussion of the crime of poverty. Lewis introduces the idea of “wotlessness”/worthlessness, a widely used epithet reserved for men, with deep roots in post-emancipation aspirations to middle-class mobility and respect, to paint a picture of the incommensurability of Western notions of free-market masculinity with the realities of absent economic opportunity that face so many young people in Jamaica’s poorest urban communities. As Lewis explains: “Inherent in the threat of wotlessness was a complex conflation of masculinity and market logic that ... meant that the more the money, the more the man” (p.6).

Chapter 1, “The Plantation Remains”, offers a review of the long lineage of scholars that have examined the plantation as a central analytic to our understanding of contemporary capitalism and anti-Blackness. Starting with the writings of New World Group scholars like Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt, George Beckford and Norman Girvan, and ending with the work of Sylvia Wynter and younger scholars like Deborah Thomas and Katherine McKittrick, Lewis centers his scholarship in the Caribbean Radical Tradition and within Black geographies to make the case for sufferation – a protracted state of everyday, normalized crisis – being the most notable characteristic of the post-plantation experience in Jamaica. This was an important chapter because it reminded us that the plantation, its racial orders, and its place within capitalism, has been a longstanding area of intellectual inquiry rooted in writings that go back to the 1940s when Oliver Cromwell Cox first outlined the co-constitutive relationship between racism and the capitalist system at a world scale. Chapter 2, “Free Zones”, provides a fascinating account of the scamming economy and the infrastructures that it relies on. Documenting the growth of the business process outsourcing industry in Jamaica since the 1980s, Lewis shows how scammers used acquired call center work practices and internet technologies to issue a form of correction – one that reversed the dispossessions of low waged call centre work by luring unsuspecting Americans to participate in the scam. Using the analogy of piracy, Lewis argues that scammers were able to create a techno-geographic breach that disrupted the directionality of the flow of capital from the Caribbean to the United States. Chapter 3, “Black Markets”, explores the role of crime as a form of self-fashioning, or what Lewis calls “an ethical practice of freedom through a concrete practice of the self that disrupts how Jamaica’s racialized poor are categorized and ‘placed’”. He demonstrates through thick description how scammers disrupted Jamaica’s racial orders and middle-class respectability politics, by not only adhering to the neoliberal reverence for demonstrated entrepreneurial zeal, but also by using the grammar of reparative justice to seize capital. Chapter 4, “Repairing Blackness”, offers an excellent conceptual framework for understanding the formal and popular rationales for reparations. I found this an excellent read

that brought questions of slavery and Black dispossession into contemporary conversations around debt, primitive accumulation through markets, and conceptions of reparation and repair. This chapter is theoretically sophisticated and complex, and Lewis presents at the end a clear problematic – if, as his respondents argue, scamming represents one of the few viable reparative pathways for Caribbean peoples, then what is Blackness in the wake of this form of repair? Lewis offers a sobering critique of reparation logics, such as those used by scammers that promote the seizure of what is considered owed. While scammers draw on the collective trauma endured by Black people to justify their actions, Lewis questions the limits of individual reparative acts like scamming to Black collective repair. This was for me the most important chapter of the book because it opened up space to talking about the contemporary condition of the Caribbean in ways that avoided an over-romanticized account of the Black vindicationism that haunts the philosophies of scammers.

While *Scammer's Yard* does not explicitly focus on the contemporary forms of financialization, it invites readers to question the ease with which scamming has become a racial signifier of Black criminality when the crime of Black dispossession enacted through the instrumentality of sub-prime mortgages, mortgage-backed securities, collateralized debt obligations or credit default swaps remains obscure. *Scammer's Yard* allows us to confront the fact that what makes the exploitation of loopholes within markets, technologies, or the law a justifiable and even celebrated act for economic agents caught up in the business of speculative market manoeuvres, is the fact that those who were dispossessed were never finance capital's imagined beneficiaries. In the concluding pages Lewis examines the growing threat of anti-money laundering and counter financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) regulations to the viability of cross-border financial flows in Jamaica. It is here that Lewis draws our attention to the broader consequences that scamming and other crimes of Black repair pose to the viability of everyday life in the region. Observing the impact of the closure of the financial intermediaries that facilitate remittance flow across borders, Lewis concludes that the heightened regulatory controls

that scamming has generated, have ultimately threatened the sustainability of this financial lifeline for many. This particular discussion read like a coda, one that aimed at bringing the book to a more comprehensive conclusion, but one that inadvertently opened up a broader set of questions around remittances and repair that, though hinted at, remained unresolved. This is a book that invites readers into a number of crucial conversations that are timely and much needed. Lewis doesn't claim to have all the answers but has generously opened up cracks for further conversation about global Blackness, capitalist dispossession, and collective repair. Extrapolating to the scale of the world system, Lewis concludes that reparations as a mode of repair may indeed be an untenable goal and offers instead a vision of Black repair that rejects the creole nationalist solutions that have historically failed Jamaica's Black and poor majority, and that demands a long overdue and unfinished envisioning of a different kind of sovereignty grounded in what Lewis refers to as the moral economy of debt and the demand for "reciprocal relations".

Scammer's Yard covers a wide and intersecting range of issues, and for this reason it will appeal to scholars across a range of disciplines: geography, anthropology, sociology, politics, diaspora studies, development studies, Caribbean studies, cultural studies, and Black studies. The book will appeal to general interest readers, too, especially those drawn to questions around contemporary abolition, Black geographies, reparations, racial capitalism, financialization, and debt and debt cultures. This is a book that is appropriate for senior undergraduates as well as graduate students. Both groups would certainly be able to engage with the theoretical and empirical material, and the range of topics covered would resonate with courses that blended economic and cultural questions related to development, social transformation, sovereignty, social justice, or labour.



Reference

Gunst L (1995) *Born Fi' Dead: A Journey through the Jamaican Posse Underworld*. New York: Henry Holt

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