'Always Returning from It': Neoliberal Capitalism, Retrospect, and Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

Sharae Deckard
(University College Dublin)

Abstract:
This article contemplates the question of the afterwardly through a reading of Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014). I argue that in *Brief History*, anxieties about the inability to summon a future beyond the present – to know a world beyond neoliberal capitalism – are formally generative, providing the literary and cultural material for experimentation. Far from having exhausted the potential of the literary, the novel instead insists on the vitality of counter-hegemonic representation of the rise of the neoliberal world-system, and the capacity to resurrect the 'not-known' social totality of an earlier historical event even as it simultaneously struggles to imagine potentialities of collective agency in the present. James constructs a retrospective history of the aftermath of the 1976 attempted assassination of Bob Marley, reinterpreted from the standpoint of the twenty-first century in order to narrate not only the individual traumas incurred by the event, but in order to rematerialise a collective history of the social, systemic, and inter-state violence perpetrated by the neoliberal turn of capitalist accumulation in the Caribbean. In particular, the novel offers a hemispheric view of the complex historical causality of the political destabilisation of Caribbean and Latin American states through CIA-sponsored drug and arms trafficking, the exploitation of extractivist resource regimes, and the economic imposition of structural adjustment programmes.

CounterText 4.2 (2018): 169–191
DOI: 10.3366/count.2018.0126

www.euppublishing.com/count

Keywords: Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, narcoliterature, *testimonio*, crime fiction, drug war capitalism, narcoliberalism, neoliberalism.

Back in 2005, Jean Laplanche had emphasised the temporal significance of the notion of *l'aprés-coup* for psychoanalysis: 'It establishes a complex and reciprocal relationship between a significant event and its resignification in afterwardness, whereby the event acquires new psychic efficiency' (Laplanche 2005: 277–8). Through a world-literary reading of the counter-textual strategies of Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), this article explores the doubled sense of temporality implied by Laplanche's interpretation of *Nachträglichkeit* as the synthesis of two temporal movements: the linear movement of deferred action and the retroactivity of after-the-event comprehension. In James's *Brief History*, this 'event' is the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976, reinterpreted from the afterwardly vantage of the twenty-first century in the attempt to comprehend not only the individual traumas incurred by the would-be assassins and survivors of the attempt, but in order to rematerialise a collective history of the violence incurred by the rise of neoliberal accumulation in the Caribbean. The reverberations of the event across time, radiating out across the novel's extraordinary cast of multiple narrators, enable a meditation not only on the psychic wounds of the gunmen and victims involved in the original event, but a hemispheric imagination of the event's structural causality in the broader context of US imperial violence and hegemony. It articulates a critique of the localised experiences of organised crime, structural poverty, and hierarchical constellations of race, gender, and class in Kingston, Jamaica in conjunction with larger systemic forces of neoliberal destabilisation, structural adjustment, and drug trafficking. As such, I argue that the novel looks backwards to the 1970s by way of trying to comprehend the sense of historical paralysis in the present, constructing a new periodisation of neoliberal accumulation in each of its significant decades. James offers a counter-textual history of the 'not known' causality and aftermath of the Marley assassination attempt as a key to understanding the historical rise of the neoliberal world-system and the subsequent crisis of futurity in the late neoliberal era. As Cathy Caruth succinctly puts it, 'To understand the truly temporal aspect of *Nachträglichkei*t, or afterwardsness, you have to take into account what is not known, both at the beginning, and later' (Caruth 2001: para. 18).

Neoliberal destabilisation and the Cold Drug War

In James's *Brief History*, anxieties about the inability to summon a future beyond the present – to know a world beyond neoliberal capitalism – are formally generative. As such, they provide the very material or problem for literary and formal experimentation for James, reactivating and combining an array of intermedial genres. These range from high literary modernism (adapting William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Marguerite Duras), to Latin American genres reinterpreted in an Anglophone Caribbean context (*narcoliteratura*, *testimonio,* the maximalist total novel, and the collective polyphony of Roberto Bolaño's *Savage Detectives),* national Jamaican culture, including yardie fiction focusing on the urban poor (such as the yard novels of C.L.R. James, Alfred Mendes and Roger Mais in the 1930s–50s), the globalised musical innovations of reggae and dancehall music, as well as the transnational aesthetics of gangster films, westerns, and B-movie pulp fiction (from John Wayne to Quentin Tarantino to *The Harder They Come*). As author, James is like a dancehall emcee, sampling a whole repertoire of tunes from the past, rewriting and recalibrating familiar riffs and beats into new music, playing with a multitude of narratorial voices and genres in order to weave the texture of a new epic. Far from having exhausted the potential of the literary, the novel insists instead on the vitality of counter-hegemonic representation: on the latter's capacity to resurrect the 'not-known' social totality of an earlier historical moment, even as it simultaneously struggles to mobilise potentialities of resistance, or to fathom collective agency in the present.

The events of the novel's narrative present unfold over five separate days, 2 and 3 December, 1976; 15 February, 1979; 14 August, 1985, and 22 March, 1991 – hence marking an expansion of the modernist novel that charts the course of one day into one charting four different days and moving between different geographies: Kingston and Montego Bay, Miami and New York. The plot centres around a fictional re-telling of the execution attempt on Bob Marley (referred to only as 'the Singer') in 1976 by a posse of eight shooters, led by Josey Wales. The novel's title refers to the eventual deaths of seven of the eight attempted assassins, although far more deaths occur in the course of action, including a massacre in an American crack house in Bushwick, NY, as well as the references to disappearances, massacres, and genocides committed in the course of CIA cold war interventions in Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and Colombia.

Marlon James's novel employs a generic emphasis on detection and the formal use of a multiplicity of narrators to re-assemble the complex interconnections between neoliberal adjustment, government destabilisation and the narcotics boom in the Caribbean and in Latin America during the mid-70s. As such, it is exemplary of a world-literary turn towards global (rather than post-colonial) novels, whose horizons of representation move beyond the operative totality of the nation and towards that of global capitalism. For James, Jamaica's political and economic situation in the mid-1970s cannot be narrated outside the context of the wider hemisphere: 'It will turn out to be an international story. You can't tell a story about Jamaica in 1976, without telling the story of Ecuador in 1976, Washington in 1976, London in 1976' (cited in Harvey 2015: para. 24). The novel approaches the global subject of the internationalisation of crime in the neoliberal era through the prism of Jamaica's involvement in the expansion of cocaine frontiers across the hemispheric Americas. CIA-sponsored agendas of destabilisation in tandem with neoliberal disciplines of debt and deregulation restructured Jamaica's formal economy, resulting in a staggering debt–to–GDP ratio of 140 percent and helping to induce a 'thirty year crisis' of the state (Meeks 2014: 181). The novel's 'brief history' restrospectively examines how organised crime networks expanded to fill the vacuum caused by the crippling of the formal economy and the hegemonic dissolution of the state.

The counter-textual form of *Brief History* draws on the documentary strategy of Gay Talese's famous 1966 essay for *Esquire* magazine, titled 'Frank Sinatra Has a Cold' (Talese 2016). After Talese was unable to get an interview with Sinatra himself, he structured his reportage not as a puff-personality piece on an individual celebrity, but rather as an investigation of the larger power relations surrounding the Sinatra industry through interviews with his employees: 'For Frank Sinatra was now involved with many things involving many people – his own film company, his record company, his private airline, his missile-parts firm, his real-estate holdings across the nation, his personal staff of seventy-five – which are only a portion of the power he is and has come to represent' (Talese 2016: para. 3). In *Brief History*, the mostly absent figure of The Singer performs a similar function to that of Sinatra, acting as the locus of a socio-political exploration of the habitus and lifeworlds of a whole complex of characters in relation to the larger political economy in which they are enmeshed. The novel circles

around the after-effects of the assassination attempt reverberating through time, using perceptions from all the people on the periphery as opposed to the people in the centre of the action in order to tell a larger story than that of Marley himself. There is no hagiographic exploration of the Singer's art or charisma; he is not subjectivised as a narratorial voice.

Instead, the narrative's logic of detection revolves around the exposure of the hidden political currents in Jamaica's election year in 1978, when the US, frightened by the spectre of socialism expanding across the Caribbean archipelago in solidarity with Cuba, sent CIA operatives to destabilise Michael Manley's leftist People's National Party (PNP) and back the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) led by Edward Seaga, popularly vilified as CIA-ga. This backing took the role of arms distribution to the Jamaican dons and militias controlling votes in the inner-city communities supportive of the JLP. Rivke Jaffe summarises the system of garrison politics as a kind of 'hybrid state,' in which systematic linkages between informal leaders – Jamaica dons – residents in inner-city communities and 'formal' governmental actors constitute a kind of 'illicit form of public-private partnership that emerged in the context of neoliberalisation', wherein the garrisons function as enclaves for the 'outsourcing of state functions' (Jaffe 2013: 736). The novel portrays the assassination attempt as a covert, CIA-sponsored operation instrumentalising garrison competition, motivated by US fears that Marley's advocacy of Rastafarian concepts of love and solidarity in conjunction with his potential alignment with the PNP would bestow a dangerous symbolic legitimacy on Manley's democratic socialism.

The novel's genius, however, lies in its move beyond a focus on the Singer and the spectacular violence of the event, to a representation of the execution attempt as part of Josey Wales's successful bid to impress the Colombia drug cartels in Medellin in order to become a global 'don of dons' – and expand his drug trade beyond Kingston and Jamaica, transporting Colombian cocaine into Miami, New York, and Kansas City. Josey Wales outsmarts the CIA plan to off him after the assassination, and because he gives the CIA 'Jamaica on a plate' by destabilising the election year, they arrange for the DEA to turn a blind eye to his cocaine-shipping operations:

> Medellín on line two. So I let Louis the con man sweet me up with his con-plan. . . . I don't tell him that I about to set up a man in Miami and one in New York. I don't tell him that *yo tengo suficiente español para conocer que eres la*

> *más gran broma en Sudamérica*. . . . And they tell me the news, that the Singer's giving money to Papa-Lo and them two thinking big, thinking of some way to eliminate the need for all people like them. . . . And I say to the politicians the Americans sure, to prove that me is the don of all dons I going do what need to be done. The man say let me be clear that the United States government does not support or condone any illegal or disruptive action of any kind in sovereign territories that are her neighbours. (James 2014: 43–44)

Through the global ambitions of Josey, who serves as an avatar for the entrepreneurial rapacity and intensified violence of neoliberal accumulation, the novel explores the structural causality of organised crime in the neoliberal era. It offers a counter-textual history positing the expansion of Jamaican organised crime from the mid-1970s not solely as the legacy of colonial underdevelopment in the nation, but rather as the twin corollary of destabilisation and the economic evacuation of state services and protections in the wake of IMF and World-Bank structural adjustments. The 'successful' model of destabilisation that combined political violence with the Friedmanite measures of the Chicago school economists – deployed in Chile after President Nixon ordered the CIA to 'make the economy scream' in order to unseat Salvador Allende – was subsequently deployed in Jamaica to force Manley to capitulate to loan conditions, creating artificial shortages of food and basics required for daily life, and using 'shock and awe' tactics of terror. The novel depicts neo-imperialist US trade policy and military intervention in Cold War arenas and the depredations of the debt trap in the wake of the 1973 and 1979 oil price shocks, as intersecting relations in a complex causality.

Significantly, James calls himself a 'post-postcolonial' writer, and the novel's referents are 'Southern and hemispheric, not just classically postcolonial' (Ellis 2015: para. 20). The economic, social, and political legacies of (neo)colonialism are vividly focalised in the novel, subjectivised through the spectre of Sir Arthur George Jennings, a duppy who haunts the narrative as the colonial voice of pre-independence Jamaica that cannot yet be stilled:

> *Listen*. Dead people never stop talking. Maybe because death is not death at all, just a detention after school. You know where you're coming from and you're always returning from it. You know where you're going though you

> never seem to get there and you're just dead. . . . The dead never stop talking and sometimes the living hear. (James 2014: 1)

This posthumous narration is reminiscent of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, which James cites in the book's acknowledgements, the Faulknerian voice of the past which is not past. It also recalls the implicitly classed narration of Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, in which the narrator's voluble narration from beyond the grave acts as formal analogue to the Brazilian plantocracy's refusal to relinquish the racist slave society on which their privilege and riches was founded. This is the afterwardly in a negative capacity, imagined not as totalising retrospect that enables the recovery of the prospect of futurity, but rather as political haunting, the paralysis of the present by the social formations of the past. However, while Jennings opens the entire novel and frequently interjects his views in the early sections set in the 1970s, his voice entirely disappears by the final two sections of the novel, 'White Lines/Kids in America' and 'Sound Boy Killing', which are mostly set in the Jamaican diaspora in the US. Even in those sections where his voice lingers as a ghostly assertion of the colonial mentality, it is in jostling juxtaposition with the brash assertions of Alex Pierce, the *Rolling Stone* journalist who represents the influence of US media apparatuses in cultural globalisation, and the cynical voices of 'The Company' – Barry Diflorio, Peter Nasser, Louis Johnson, and Doctor Love, the Cuban exile and counter-insurgent trained in the School of the Americas. These licit and covert operatives plan campaigns to destabilise Manley's social democratic government and prevent the nationalisation of US-owned bauxite companies in Jamaica, while Pierce struggles to understand how the Singer's music is embroiled in the larger political landscape.

In an interview in *The Jamaica Observer,* James underscores the point that his novel moves beyond the binary relationship between colony and British imperial metropole around which literary representations of the post-colonial are usually organised, to an interrogation of the new forms of mental and economic colonisation under the rise of US hegemony:

> Most of us, if we were colonised, we were colonised mentally and economically by the US. So the sort of dialogue between us and the Mother Country, or the rejection of dialogue between us and the Mother Country, we care about neither. Does some of that linger? Yes, some of it still lingers.

> . . . But . . . I think that even when we write about the past, we're writing it with different lenses, we're writing it certainly without a sort of defend-the-Mother-Country or respond to the Mother Country. (cited in McKenzie 2015: para. 11)

Hence, at the level of form, the transition between Jennings' posthumous narration and the more contemporary American voices signals the historical transition from the influence of the British imperial metropole and perpetuation of neo-colonialism, to the ascendancy of the US empire as the dominant instrument of economic and political subjugation: what David Harvey has called the era of 'the new imperialism' (Harvey 2003: viii). James' novel also invokes the political ecology of the narcotics trade in its positioning of the emergence of the 'hybrid state' in Jamaica in direct relation to the rise of cartels in Mexico and Colombia, in conjunction with the politics of extractivism and structural adjustment. The red, ferruginous earth of Jamaica's interior is rich in bauxite, the source of aluminium. In 1974, Jamaica was the world's second largest producer and exporter of bauxite, and its industrial economy was primarily organised around this monoculture of raw material export. Production was monopolised by three North American companies, Alcan, Kaiser, and Reynolds, draining its raw materials without contributing to taxes. In the novel, Kim Clarke (a persona of Nina Burgess after she goes into hiding) reluctantly dates an American executive from a bauxite mining corporation, in a desperate act to earn a visa to flee to the US. He rants about Manley's government's imposition of a bauxite levy on the corporations that would force them to contribute money back to the country, and raising the spectre of future nationalisation:

> Enough of this government and this Michael Manley wanting to suck cash from the bauxite companies like they don't already do enough to help this country. *Shit, Alcoa transformed this fucking backwater island, sure they didn't built the railway but they certainly put it to profitable use. And other things: schools, modern buildings, running water, toilets, it was a slap in the face really, demanding a levy on top of all we do for this country. And that slap in the face was the first shot heard around the world for Jamaica's entry into communism, mark my words. Nationalisation is always the first step, how these fucking people voted the PNP back into office is a fucking mystery to me, babykins.* He's said this little rant so often that I can almost recite it verbatim, even the mixed metaphors. So what about that

> pitch-lake you guys left that's only good for gunmen to dump bodies in so that they will disintegrate without a trace? I say. (emphasis in the original; James 2014: 282)

Kim's retort emphasises the environmental violence of the waste by-products of the mining, correlating the lake of pitch with the social violence of extractivism, which drains the raw materials of the periphery for export to the core. At the same time, she castigates his sexism and mocks his ideological paranoia that Jamaica was about to become 'the capital of Cuba', exclaiming 'you Yankees are afraid of communism the way old country women are afraid of rolling calf' (James 2014: 296). Elsewhere her sister Kimmie critiques the rightwing propaganda of the JLP as 'politricks' and 'CIA samfie bullshit' (102), defending the PNP not only for passing an equal-rights-for-women act and extending free education, but also for imposing the levy. And yet, the novel portrays 'politricks' as extending far beyond soft propaganda campaigns, such as CIA station chief Barry Diflorio's development of ludicrously infantile colouring books intended to convince Jamaicans of the danger of the 'red menace'. Instead, the Singer assassination attempt, and the slaughters presided over by Doctor Love and his cronies in Central America, stand as evidence of the lengths of physical violence and coercion to which the Cold War politics of destabilisation extend, transcending the national arena of electoral party politics.

In his research on the geopolitical shifts shaping the globalisation of cocaine, Paul Gootenberg has demonstrated how the combination of US-led 'coca imperialism', CIA-sponsored terror during Operation Condor, and the militarisation of the 'war against drugs' has acted in concert with economic shock therapy to spur the geographical relocations of drug commodity chains, trafficking centres, and escalating conflicts closer to the United States in its 'long march north' (Gootenberg 2012: 159). The US wooed the exiled class of Cuban cocaine barons thrown out by Fidel Castro after the Cuban revolution, and refashioned them as counter-insurgents to leftwing Latin American governments, as in the case of 'Doctor Love' in James's novel, a Cuban political exile responsible for training Contras in Nicaragua, who ends by arming Josey Wales and transforming his posse into a globalised para-military operation. Then, US involvement in Pinochet's coup in Chile helped globalise and militarise the *coca* trade. Traffickers were forced to relocate from Chile in response to Pinochet's campaign of

terror against *coca* growers as evidence of his loyalty to the US anti-drug agenda, and the trade was transformed from small-time postwar smuggling and peaceful peasant farming in the central Andes to a concentrated cartel epicentre in northern Andean Colombia. The CIA sponsorship of a transnational class of Jamaican traffickers using their contacts in the US diaspora to introduce Colombian crack to New York and Miami was the next link in the northern march, using the Caribbean as a stepping stone in what is sometimes wryly referred to as the 'cold drug war', given the centrality of the narcotics trade to the financing of cold war interventions in the hemisphere.

The Jamaican moment demonstrates, therefore, the intimate link between resource extractivism and the emergence of what Dawn Paley has called 'drug war capitalism' in the neoliberal era, which combines 'terror with policy-making' in order to 'crack open' previously inaccessible territories for transnational capital interests across the American hemisphere (Paley 2014: 16). In addition to bolstering the expansion of US finance, flooding the coffers of US banks with massive profits from drug money laundered through financial investments and services, benefiting the US military-industrial complex by spurring arms-trade in the course of militarisation on both sides of drug conflicts, and upholding the corrupt political apparatuses of clientele states, drug war capitalism aids transnational US corporations that operate in free trade export zones by terrorising and dispossessing populations – most often indigenous peoples marginalised by ethnicity and class – and enabling policies promoting foreign direct investment and privatisation of ecological commons to be implemented. Neoliberal strategies of financialisation and speculation are thus combined with explicitly violent strategies of expropriation, land-grabbing and plunder, clearing the way for large-scale mining, extractivist and agri-business projects.

Brief History constructs an afterwardly perspective of the terror unleashed by the attack on the Singer as instrumental in weakening Manley's will to resist IMF demands to 'open' the economy by dismantling trade protections and foreclosing the possibility of resource sovereignty, thereby legitimating the intensification of bauxite extractivism. James represents Jamaica as a kind of laboratory and test-case for the clearances and enclosures promulgated in Mexico and central America in the 1990s following the imposition of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and in so

doing repositions the Anglophone Caribbean islands as being part of a larger, Latin American history. The novel's countertextual strategy can thus be understood as countering-by-outing: using the imaginative capacity of fiction to repudiate dominant narratives and to reveal a complex and occluded history. This retrospective positing of Jamaica's history as not merely an 'island story', but a hemispheric one, is echoed in the novel's narrative form and its incorporation of devices from the Latin American literary tradition.

Narcoliteratura, testimonio, *and narcoliberalism*

In interview, James has acknowledged having adopted Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* as a "very conscious template" for the novel's extraordinary manipulation of twelve different narrative voices and cast of twenty-six characters (Ellis 2015: para. 7). This intertextual renovation of polyphonic form creates a thematic analogy between James's analysis of the nexus of organised crime and political destabilisation in Jamaica, and between Bolaño's concerted textual engagement in *Savage Detectives* and *2666* with the interconnections between neoliberal structural adjustment, the Mexican narcotics trade, and the repression of left-wing governments across Latin America. As I have argued elsewhere, Bolaño's capitalist epic *2666* depicts the borderland city of Ciudad Juárez as a portal into the systemic violence intrinsic to the neoliberal world-system in the era of US core hegemony, correlating the misogynist femicides and narco-violence arising in post-NAFTA Mexico with the global ascendancy of neoliberal capital and the 'Pax Americana' after World War II (Deckard 2012: 352). If for journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, 'world order reveals its greatest contradictions' in Ciudad Juárez, 'the kind of human settlement that results from the destabilising tensions of geopolitical interest' (Rodríguez 2012: 7), so too does James's novel offer a countertextual view of Jamaica's Kingston as an urban setting in which the violence of the neoliberal world-system is made starkly clear. Consider the passage in which CIA station chief Barry Diflorio encounters a village of trashpickers built alongside a dump:

> The houses are even smaller, zincer, poorer and the people outside are heading where the green car is going. They look like hills rising on both sides of the road. It's not until twenty or so feet away that I see what they are. Mountains and mountains of garbage – not mountains, dunes and dunes

> like the Sahara just switched out sand for junk and smoke. The smoke is sour and thick, like animals are burning as well. People are climbing all over the garbage dunes, even the burning ones, digging through the junk and stuffing whatever in black plastic bags. (James 2014: 207)

Like the pitch-lake of residue from the bauxite mines where the gunmen dump bodies, the urban yards, dumps and mines depicted in the novel constitute a geography representative of neoliberal capitalism's generation of wastelands and 'surplus populations', as well as the informal economies into which such people are drawn in order to survive, while at the same time hinting at the mounting ecological contradictions faced by the neoliberal accumulation regime.

On a formal level, *Brief History* reinvents not only high modernist forms from Euro-American literary traditions – the posthumous narration of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* that mediates the lingering social hierarchies of the plantocratic US South, the Joycean stream-of-consciousness narrating the everyday – but also contemporary Latin American genres such as *narcoliteratura* and *testimonio*. According to Miguel A. Cabañas Enríquez, the *narcoliteratura* genre of Latin American detective and crime novels is characterised by border, regional, and hemispheric scales of representation that delve 'into the relationship between drug trafficking and power', exploring the 'dark dependency between murder and politics' in the state, and presenting narco-commerce 'not as isolated from the processes of hegemonic power, but rather as part of the historical and transnational complexities that these processes involve' (Enríquez 2006: 75). To give one paradigmatic example, Elmer Mendoza's novel *El amante de Janis Joplin* [*Janis Joplin's Lover*; 2001] links together state and CIA-sponsored repression of the 1970s revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and Mexico with the growth of drug trafficking, to which the regime's security services turn a blind eye whilst torturing left-wing dissidents. Mendoza imagines a social totality where violence radiates from centres of power and government officials and CIA-sponsored para-militaries commit more violence than do the 'revolutionaries' falsely accused of being 'traffickers'.

Narcoliteratura as a genre is an inheritor of the dictator novel, where *capos* replace *caudillos* as the avatars of terror, but in which state violence remains central, inextricably imbricated with organised crime. In the novels of Mexican writers like Mendoza or Paco Ignacio Taibo II, the generic

conventions of crime fiction are subverted by the illegitimacy of state legal apparatuses:

> Policemen and lawbreakers are one and the same. Here, the state backs the criminal leaders, and vice versa. And here, the only crime is not murder, drug trafficking, or rape; but dissent. In Élmer Mendoza's *El amante de Janis Joplin,* left-wing guerrillas are rounded up, beaten, water-boarded, and presented to the media as drug traffickers, while the real narcos drive round under police protection. In Taibo's novels, the private detective is often forced to blow up the police station as well as the criminals' hideout in order to bring any sort of resolution. . . . If European crime was a literature for the decline of the welfare state, Mexican 'narcoliterature' perhaps better represents the emerging neoliberal world of political impotence, state-criminal collusion, and staggering inequality. (Smith 2013: para.10)

As such, the genre can be understood as foregrounding an afterwardly perspective of the emergence of neoliberal states in Latin America in concert with narco-regimes and US imperialism, a formation that Mexican sociologist Luís A. Astorga has called 'narcoliberalism' (*narcoliberalismo*) where drug trafficking is criminalised by the legal structure in the state with the 'legitimate monopoly over establishing the rules of the game,' but is not eliminated because of its 'entrepreneurial' economic power and because of its usefulness to security services in financing arms for counter-insurgencies, and for justifying the exercise of state terror in the securitisation, discipline, and dispossession of marginalised populations (Astorga 1995: 31).

Although originating in the Anglophone Caribbean, James's novel could equally be argued to present a critique of narcoliberalism. However, unlike a narco-noir or detective novel, it does not focus on the perspective of detectives, but on the perpetrators and survivors of violence. Its art of 'social detection' is oriented not towards the prosecution of individual illegal acts or criminals, but rather towards the exposé of the structural causality of organised drug trafficking. His polyphonic form must cut across gender, class, race, sexuality, geography, and time to create a collective history of Jamaica, which cannot be captured through a single narrator describing an individual experience. Unlike 'neoliberal novels' from the US, which are often focalised through the point of the view of elite political and economic classes, embodying the 'plutocratic imagination' of technocrats

and professional classes (Williams 2013: para. 12), *Brief History* offers instead the perspective from within a semi-peripheral nation – the nation of those who have borne the direct consequences of the policies implemented by northern capitalist elites. Like *Savage Detectives,* its first-person narration captures the 'life-cycle of a generation', employing a 'carnivalesque juggling of voices and chronologies' that recalls the great 'total novels' of the Boom in its epic seven-hundred-page sweep' (Caldwell 2009: para. 6). And like Bolaño's novel, its fundamental structuring device is the first-person testimonial-style narrative that arose in Latin American prose after the Boom in response to the vanquishing of political vanguards, an attempt to forge a 'more radically democratic and indigenous aesthetic "from below"' (Caldwell 2009: para. 7). In this sense, the novel's countertextual idiom could be understood as located in its juxtaposition of the thematic material of narcoliterature with the ethical impulse of *testimonio*, the literature of political witness, to create a hybridised *narco-testimonio* for the Caribbean, reinventing a genre intimately associated with Central America since the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* to bear witness to the 'vanished' ones not only of Latin America, but of the Caribbean.

I, Rigoberta Menchu employs the storytelling tradition of testimony, in which one speaker presents the story of an entire community as though it were her own, in this case focalising the violence perpetrated against the Mayan Indian community in Guatemala in the course of neo-colonial debt peonage and state terror during the civil war – through Rigoberta's perspective as a doubly-oppressed indigenous woman. So too do the multiple narrative personas of Nina Burgess in James's novel ground an important perspective of the gendered experience of political and social violence, where women are often exposed to compounded forms of oppression. As I will demonstrate here, the punctual interruptions of the narrative by Nina's point of view decentres the idea of ideal male protagonists who stand for homogenous, masculinised notions of violence, and offers instead a crucial counterpoint: one that emphasises the appropriation of women's labour in the sphere of social reproduction.

Gender violence, social reproduction and testimonial

Critics have criticised the representation of gender and sexuality in the novel for reinforcing stereotypes of hyper-masculinity and voyeuristically

dwelling on sexual violence. Nadia Ellis's nuanced review in *Public Books* is demonstrative of this critique. She argues that

> James here mostly replicates the effect of sexual violence as suffusion. This effect is accurate in its way – misogyny, homophobia, and abuse, and the use of sex and language to convey them are, indeed, widespread in Jamaica. This novel, though, wed to a poetics of excess, sacrifices the potential for empathy (so much of the sex is presented as if narrators were hovering somewhere above the action); for complication (a rigid verisimilitude marks the sexism of the characters); or indeed, for reflection (since there is virtually no pause in the presentation). (Ellis 2015: para. 19)

James responds to such criticisms by admitting that his writing, in both its content and experimental form, is 'risking excess', whether 'explicit gay sex scenes', or 'seven-page sentences' and climactic moments 'written in free verse' (cited in Greenidge 2014: para. 14). He foregrounds the economic and power relations implicit in different forms of sex, whether 'gratuitous sex' or coercive 'duty sex', and defends his choice to employ verisimilitude rather than to allude to 'offstage events', stating that explicit representation is not meant to invoke a 'pornography of violence' but is rather necessary to avoid the danger of anesthetising brutality (cited in Greenidge 2014: para. 33–34). This politics of representation is complicated by the novel's commodification in the world-literary market, in danger of promoting a reified image of Kingston as a site of infernal criminality, even though the novel's own form works hard to deconstruct such myths by foregrounding the systemic causes of organised crime and forms of terror perpetrated by states and supranational economic institutions.

However, I would also argue that amidst the polyphony of narrators, the multiple narratorial personas of Nina Burgess – who is herself a 'vanished' one – offer an important corrective to the masculinist representations of gang violence and sexuality that often dominate *narcoliteratura* and gangster fiction. Through Nina (as well as queer characters like Weeper) the novel works to foreground the centrality of gender, sexuality, and forms of patriarchal violence to intersecting systems of oppression. It adds a critique of the gendering of social reproduction to the crime genre's typical emphasis on illegal activity in the informal economy. In the previous section, I focused on the international, regional, and macro-scales of violence which the novel

implicates in its representation of US-sponsored political destabilisation of Caribbean states and the globalisation of the narcotics trade. Here, I want to attend to how the novel also uncovers micro-political practices of power through the mapping of intimate relationships between individuals, and the ways in which they are constituted and fissured by acts of violence.

It is significant that Nina Burgess is the only survivor, in the novel, of the killings of the witnesses and assassins involved in the attempted assassination of Bob Marley. The other gunmen are systematically hunted down and killed throughout the novel. By its conclusion, we realise that most of the narrators of the novel are posthumous, voices of the dead preserved in the *testimonio*'s afterwardly act of collective anamnesis. In the narrative logic of the text, hyper-masculinity is thus cast as destructive and unsustainable. Nina, however, remains defiantly alive. Acting as a focal point for the present of the narrative, as well as the only example of a completed *Bildung* in the novel, she achieves an adulthood that is tragically denied to the young men, and becomes the only character to be allowed the vantage-point of an afterwardly perspective onto the past. Her narration is reminiscent not only of the central role of women as witness and political conscience in *testimonios* like Rigoberta Menchu's, but also recalls Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* in which the dead matriarch Addie Lundgren's narration counter-poses that of her husband and sons, refusing their patriarchal views of women as confined to the sphere of motherhood, or as achieving fulfilment only through their provision of emotional care for the wounded psyches of men. Nina's narration similarly turns on the traumas of being constrained within patriarchal conceptions of sexuality and women's labour.

Nina is the survivor of an array of forms of gendered and domestic violence, consisting of both physical and verbal assault: when she is called a 'whore' (200) by her father and whipped with his belt after she sleeps with The Singer; when her mother calls her 'a demon from the black pit of Gehenna' (225) for having failed to embody social mores of sexual purity; when she is expected to sleep with one of her clients for whom she serves as a careworker in New York; or when she is sexualised by policemen who pick her up on Hope Road as she walks home at night. As Nina sits in the police car, her interior monologue captures the social contradictions of internalised gender expectations, alternating between fury at a patriarchal society in which women are held accountable for sexual violence perpetrated against them, and a sense of terrified shame

in which she blames her own behaviour for what she fears might be her incipient rape:

> More than anything else, the one thing that makes you blame and judge yourself and acquit them even before this reaches a court of men who probably discipline their wives with a punch before leaving for court, is that you don't have any panties on. Not only are you the slut your mother talked about but even she will look at you with that you-got-what-you-were-looking-for look. (James 2014: 122)

However, Nina's ability to survive when all the other characters die speaks to her resourcefulness and creativity, and foregrounds a solitary source of female agency in a novel which is otherwise bleak in its depiction of a lack of autonomy for individuals within neoliberal society. Nina's stubborn streak of rebellion is usually contained by her conformist outward behaviour, but flares up in crucial moments of resistance: as when she seizes the belt from her father's hand and whips him back; or when she invents new identities in order to hide from Josey Wales and manages to win an exit visa to New York. But this escape is achieved at immense cost: the immolation of her own identity and total deracination from Jamaican culture. Her disappearance is both physical and subjective. She sacrifices her name, her family, her origins, and any opportunity for interpersonal connection, vanishing her identity into a series of tightly circumscribed gender roles and stereotypes: Kim Clarke, the mistress of a married corporate American executive; Dorcas Palmer, the immigrant domestic cleaner and care provider; Millicent Segree, the nurse. These forms of disappearance allegorise the psychological violence of gender conformity, which requires women to internalise patriarchal ideology and alienate their true selves.

Using forged credentials and living beneath the radar of the immigration authorities in the US, Nina Burgess could also be considered a 'criminal', engaged in a form of illegality that is not characterised by physical violence but is necessitated by precarity, even as she performs a gender identity that is highly normative, that of the well-spoken, docile, good girl. This identity is held in constant tension with her interior monologue, sparking with witty commentary on the sexist and racist behaviour she encounters, as when she sardonically thinks in response to the American executive, 'Sometimes I have to remind even him that three feet north of this vagina is a brain' (James 2014: 282), or when she reflects on the gendered nature of housework:

'I don't know if I have ever seen a man in kitchen who wasn't on TV' (James 2014: 534). As she increasingly rejects the restrictive gender ideologies which shaped her adolescence, Nina's political consciousness becomes more intersectional, leading her to critique the class and race politics of 'First World feminism', remarking in her Millicent persona that '[M]ost of this feminism business was nothing more than white American women telling non-white women what to do and how to do it, with this patronising if-you-become-just-like-me-you'll-be-free bullshit' (James 2014: 611).

At various points throughout the novel, Nina and her sister draw equations between the objectification of women and the violence of resource extractivism perpetrated by transnational corporations in the postcolonial nation, using metaphors of rape, as when Kimmie confronts her parents: 'What about the equal rights for women act? What about all those bauxite companies who now at least have to pay a fee before they rape us?' (James 2014: 102). This is the same analogy that social reproduction theorist Silvia Federici draws between the appropriation of the unpaid labour of both women and nature: '[W]omen have been designated as men's common, a natural source of wealth and services to be as freely appropriated by them as the capitalists have appropriated the wealth of nature' (Federici 2012: 147). As Maria Mies observes, colonisation, patriarchy, and capitalist accumulation have historically worked together in the 'subordination of women, nature, and colonies' (Mies 1986: 77).

Crucially, all of Nina's roles turn on the gendered labour of social reproduction: women's work in the informal or unpaid economies of care, housework, and sex. Feminist theorists have underscored the ways in which capitalist profit through exploitation of waged labour in the sphere of commodity production is dependent on the appropriation of the unpaid work of women in the sphere of social reproduction, both in terms of childcare and housework but also immaterial forms of emotional labour. This unpaid work is necessary not only to the continued reproduction of life and society, in which women are expected to act as biological machines producing labour power, but also acts a kind of sponge which buffers the social violence unleashed on the family unit by neoliberal austerity, at the same time as it subjects poor women to increased violence:

> Woman's condition in capitalism is born with violence (just as the free waged worker is born with violence) . . . Within the current context of the population's reproduction, the woman continues to suffer the violence of

> poverty at the world level (since her unpaid responsibility for the home makes her the weak contracting party in the external labour market). Because of her lack of economic resources, she also suffers the further violence of being sucked increasingly into organised prostitution. (Dalla Costa 1995: 11)

The novel explores the outsourcing of care work and reproductive work to black women immigrants in an informal economy of illegal labour in New York when Nina in her Dorcas Palmer guise cares for Colthirst, a man with a neurological condition that leaves him unable to remember anything since 1980, trapped in an interminable present of blank days. Dorcas works for Miss Betsy's employment agency, which 'places mostly black women, mostly immigrants, into these posh houses to take care of their very young children or very old parents who, news to me, have the very same needs. In exchange for us putting up with whatever shit, sometimes literally shit, they don't ask questions about immigration or employment status' (James 2014: 443). The precarity of such employment often pressures women to participate in unpaid sex work which, in a typically witty retort, Dorcas refuses: 'I told Miss Betsy that while I will scoop up any load of shit, I'll have nothing to do with withered white penis. She was impressed that I managed to stay in standard English the whole time, even when I asked if this was a whorehouse with granny care as a fringe benefit' (James 2014: 443).

However, Nina's political consciousness is most often expressed in interior monologue; she usually represses overt spoken critique, hiding behind her carefully constructed camouflage. This repression takes a physical and psychological toll; by the novel's end, she is consuming a host of pharmaceutical aids to ward off stress and exhaustion: 'Xanax for anxiety. Valium for sleep. Prozac for depression' (James 2014: 611). These pharmaceuticals could be understood as prostheses of internal control, which discipline Nina to keep performing the labour of carework and enable her to maintain an increasingly impossible identity. Her consumption of drugs bolsters the legal drug economy of the United States, the largest global consumer of legal opioids and benzodiazepines. Furthermore, Nina's reliance on pharmaceuticals can be read as evidence of the unsustainable contradiction of the squeeze on social reproduction in late neoliberalism in conjunction with the intensification of labour and the working day, cuts in resources and welfare services, and the unequal terms on which women are forced to seek financial autonomy through waged work outside

the household at the same time as they bear the primary responsibility for the production and reproduction of labour-power (Dalla Costa 1995: 12). As Michael Niblett observes, 'Nina's employment as a nurse and the outsourcing of Colthirst's care by his family, suggest[s] an oblique link to what will emerge as contemporary capitalism's "crisis of care" and the increasing exhaustion of the "unpaid work of social reproduction" in which women of colour are expected to absorb the hidden costs which moneyed, white middle-class American women no longer accept' (Niblett 2018: 25).

In the last section of the novel, Nina assumes her final persona, that of Millicent Segree, after attending nursing school to formally train as a nursing professional. This ambivalent moment of *Bildung* emphasises her resilience in being able to gain an education and achieve a professional career, but remains circumscribed by her negative treatment as a care-provider by condescending doctors. In the hospital, a pivotal encounter takes place between Millicent and a Jamaican woman grieving the shooting of her partner, a member of the Ranking Dons, a rival posse to Josey Wales's. The woman immediately recognises Millicent as Jamaican, and immediately pinpoints her class status in her accent and her upbringing in Havendale: 'You no just come from Jamaica, you come from Country. So you can go on stoosh with them white people all you want, but you not fooling nobody' (James 2014: 632). Their conversation brings Millicent the liberatory news that Josey Wales has finally been killed, meaning that she no longer needs to stay in hiding, while also forcing her to confront the aspects of her own identity which she has so long repressed, insisting that she engage across class barriers with another Jamaican woman to discover what experiences they share in common and to navigate the patriarchal and racist rhetoric of the white American doctor who patronises both women.

Their encounter is fraught by the fissures of class dividing their experiences of Kingston and New York, but it is also an example of complex female subjectivity that finally establishes a momentary solidarity between two women, after six hundred pages depicting Nina's crushing alienation and traumatisation. Immediately following the hospital conversation, Nina gorges on rice and peas and fried chicken in a Jamaican takeaway, literally re-ingesting her own national culture which she had so long denied, and then vomits as her recollection of her near-execution comes rushing back to her. This surge of viscerally embodied memory finally breaks the paralysis of her trauma, enabling her to physically express and evacuate the fear that she

has so long deferred. In the last line of the novel, she finally makes a call to her sister, Kimmie, to whom she has not spoken since she fled, reversing her self-imposed exile. Thus, the novel's final moment is not of frozen, recursive trauma as in the (neo)colonial hangover of Jennings' ghost that haunts the opening narration, or the stasis of neoliberal presentism as encapsulated by Colthirst's inability to recall anything beyond the year of Reagan's election. Instead, the conclusion offers an intimation of renewed futurity through the re-materialisation of the disappeared Nina, who is finally able to reclaim the self that she has been hiding since the 'event' in 1976. That Nina's recovery is suggestively linked to her transindividual reconnection to a wider community of women somewhat counteracts the solipsistic narrowing of the narrative's focus to the survival of a single individual.

In conclusion, I have argued that the novel's retrospective account of the emergence of the neoliberal world-system is triangulating rather than monolithic in its depiction of violence. James juxtaposes explicit representation of individual acts of gun violence, indirect representation of the systemic geopolitical violence and inter-state terror structuring the globalisation of organised crime, and intimate representation of the discursive and physical violence perpetrated on women and queer folk in a capitalist patriarchy. For all that it unravels the geopolitical motivations behind the conspiracy of the 1976 attack, *Brief History* does not represent conspiracy itself as ontological, but rather constructs a core 'history' that can be re-assembled through careful reading from the vantage of the afterwardly: an inventory of who kills, who is killed, who commands disappearances, who is subjected to erasure, and above all, why. However, the bleakness of its critique of the systemic condition of violence under neoliberal capitalism is exacerbated by its lack of explicit representation of modes of collective resistance that could issue in an afterworld beyond capitalism. The text is overshadowed by the collapse of the radical hopes of the Caribbean, and its only utopian glimmer at the level of plot is the suggestion of the possible restitution of gender solidarity through Nina's redemption.

Yet, far from exhibiting a loss of literary nerve, the novel's formal and thematic ambition is extraordinary. Its countertextual aesthetics are not so much 'postliterary' as counter-hegemonic in their thrust, constructing new literary possibilities through their excavation of forms from other literary contexts and their refashioning of cultural materials from the past. Like the *soca* Nina hears on the radio in the last chapter, a musical form

originating in Trinidad but now popular in Jamaica due to the rise of trans-Caribbean media channels and the commercialisation of Carnival, the novel is interested in the political economy of the transmission and evolution of cultural forms, and the different potentials for class and internationalist re-alignment mediated in their aesthetics. Furthermore, in its formal recuperation of the not-known social totality of the 'event' and its retrospective construction of a collective history periodising neoliberalism's advances from the 1970s through the 1990s from the vantage of the contemporary moment, the novel does offer a slender hope of making history of the present. Jennings's assertion that 'the dead never stop talking and sometimes the living hear' can in this light be re-interpreted not only in its negative, apolitical connotation of the perpetual recurrence of past trauma, but as the afterwardly hope that in hearing the stories of the dead, resuscitated here through the capacity of fiction to imagine the voiceless, that the living might begin to conceive of new futures.[1]

Note

1. I would like to thank Lucy Evans for valuable feedback and for the opportunity to present early versions of this research at the University of Leicester and the University of the West Indies-Mona, sponsored by her BA-funded network 'Crime and its Representation in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1834–2018' and her AHRC-funded network 'Dons, Yardies and Posses: Representations of Jamaican Organised Crime'.

References

Astorga A., Luís A. (1995), *Mitología del 'narcotraficante' en México,* Mexico City: IIS-UNAM/Plasa y Valdés.

Caldwell, Edmond (2009), 'Gutless Realism: James Wood's Housebroken Bolaño', *The Emperor Has No Clothes*, 1 January 2009 <https://contrajameswood.blogspot.ie/2009/01/gutless-realism-james-woods-housebroken.html> [accessed 20 April 2018].

Caruth, Cathy (2001), 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche', *Postmodern Culture* 11:2 <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt> [accessed 30 April 2018].

Dalla Costa, Mariarosa (1995), 'Capitalism and Reproduction', in Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, John Holloway, and Kosmas Psychopedis (eds.), *Emancipating Marx*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 7–16.

Deckard, Sharae (2012), 'Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, 351–72.

Ellis, Nadia (2015), 'Marlon James' Savage Business', *Public Books*, 1 March 2015 <http://www.publicbooks.org/marlon-jamess-savage-business/> [accessed 30 April 2018].

Enríquez, Miguel A. Cabañas (2006), 'Drug Trafficking and Literature,' *Voices of Mexico* 75, 119–24.

Federici, Silvia (2012), *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland: PM Press.

Greenidge, Kaitlyn (2014), 'Violently Wrought', *Guernica*, 3 November 2014 < https://www.guernicamag.com/violently-wrought/ > [accessed 30 April 2018].

Gootenberg, Paul (2012), 'Cocaine's Long March North, 1900–2010' *Latin American Politics and Society* 54: 1, 159–80.

Harvey, Chris (2015), 'Marlon James Interview: "I didn't want to fall into a pornography of violence"', *The Telegraph*, 13 October 2015 < https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/11672011/Booker-Prise-author-Marlon-James-interview.html > [accessed 30 April 2018].

Harvey, David (2003), *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jaffe, Rivke (2014), 'The Hybrid State: Crime and Citizenship in Urban Jamaica', *American Ethnologist* 40: 4, 734–748.

James, Marlon (2014), *A Brief History of Seven Killings,* London: OneWorld.

Laplanche, Jean (2005), 'Deferred Action', in A. de Mijolla (ed.), *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Detroit: Thomson Gale, pp. 377–79.

McKenzie, Alecia (2015), 'A Conversation with Marlon James', *Jamaica Observer*, 18 October 2015 < http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/A-Conversation-with-Marlon-James_19234263 > [accessed 30 April 2018].

Meeks, Brian (2014), *Critical Interventions in Caribbean Politics and Theory*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Mendoza, Élmer (2001), *El amante de Janis Joplin*, Mexico City: Tusquets Editores.

Mies, Maria (1986), *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, London: Zed Books.

Niblett, Michael (2018), 'The Long 1970s: Neoliberalism, Narrative Form, and Slum Ecology in the Work of Marlon James and Paulo Lins', in Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (eds), *World Literature, Neoliberalism and the Culture of Discontent*, London: Palgrave, forthcoming, pp. 1–28.

Paley, Dawn (2014), *Drug War Capitalism*, Oakland: AK Press.

Rodríguez, Sergio Gonzáles (2012), *The Femicide Machine*, trans. Michael Parker-Stainback, Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Smith, Benjamin (2013), 'Tragic Realism: The Rise of Mexican Narcoliterature', *The Conversation*, 28 July 2013 < https://theconversation.com/tragic-realism-the-rise-of-mexican-narcoliterature-16375 > [accessed 30 April 2018].

Talese, Gay (2016), 'Frank Sinatra Has a Cold' [1966], *Esquire*, 14 May 2016 < https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a638/frank-sinatra-has-a-cold-gay-talese/ > [accessed 30 April 2018].

Williams, Jeffrey (2013), 'The Plutocratic Imagination', *Dissent*, Winter 2013 < https://www.dissentmagasine.org/article/the-plutocratic-imagination > [accessed 30 April 2018].