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Trauma and Criminality in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

PAULA MORGAN

> *The only thing that ghetto people can fill a void with is a void.*
> —Marlon James

INTERVENTIONS INTO CRIMINALITY IN THE CARIBBEAN and beyond tend to focus on recuperating the individual as well as alleviating societal conditionalities which lead to criminal behaviours.[1] The complex cause-and-effect network of Caribbean gang violence has been particularly resistant to intervention. A major issue is 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. This enquiry reads Marlon James's sprawling epic *A Brief History of Seven Killings*[2] through the filters of trauma theory to demonstrate correlations between criminality and unresolved traumas on multiple levels. It explores the manner in which unrelieved historical, national and cultural traumas drill down into the lives of individuals, families and communities. I argue that trauma and crime are complex, resistant, multinational and multicultural issues that cannot be grasped through a linear, individual focus. James's narrative exemplifies the manner in which individuals are unwittingly caught up in lingering, intrusive, contemporary legacies of historical and national atrocities. Effective intervention must therefore excavate and address these rhizomes while tackling more immediate individual and communal societal conditions. This enquiry illustrates the power of narrative, in this case a sprawling polyvocal narrative, to promote interdisciplinary dialogue on the "causes, consequences, control, culture and representation of crime in Anglophone Caribbean societies".[3]

The 686-page novel is divided into four segments and covers five days. The core incident is based on an actual event – the shooting of reggae star Bob

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Marley in 1976, prior to the staging of a peace concert, intended to unite warring political factions – the People's National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), as well as the gang lords who supported them through violent interventions. True to the book title, each segment of this far from brief history is centred on death. The first two segments – "Original Rockers December 2, 1976" and "Ambush in the Night December 3, 1976" – are set in Jamaica and focus on the assassination attempt on the Singer. Death of the key players involved in the attack pervades all other segments. The third segment of the novel, "Shadow Dancin' February 15, 1979", is also set in Kingston; while the fourth and fifth segments "White Lines/Kids in America August 14, 1985" and "Sound Boy Killing March 22, 1991" are set in New York. The novel is peopled by a huge cast of characters and voices which circle and provide fragmentary, subjective, mediated exposure to the antecedents, occurrence and outcome of the central crisis in which the Singer – treasured son of the soil, mediator, supporter of the oppressed, bringer of healing and peace – is attacked and wounded. This attack against the Singer can be read as exemplary of the depth of societal woundedness and the challenge of establishing therapeutic intervention. James performs in the process an act of assemblage which frames the incident and contextualises personal histories of all actors and contributors. The complexity of the trauma narrative is heightened by the multiplicity of perspectives, the skewed mentalities, the drug-induced hazes, the chaos and confusion, the disrupted spatialities and temporalities surrounding the core event, and the haphazard lifestyles of the characters.

Much of the horrific immediacy of the novel is crafted through its astute incorporation of a series of bizarre real-life occurrences, and the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality, thus filling in gaps left by distant life histories and media reportage, in a disruptive and disturbing manner. The result is a fictional recreation of unspeakable acts – generated by wildness which emanates out of unspoken and unspeakable histories and creates gruesome scenarios which are stranger than fiction.[4] It traces the rise and fall of Storm Posse don Josey Wales, modelled after real-life Kingston Shower Posse don Lester Coke. Fictional and real characters experience gang-style execution of their children in identical fashions. This is also the case for the incident which triggers the downfall of both the fictional and the real don – the threat of extradition to the US for his mass slaughter of occupants of a

crack house in revenge for a robbery by an addict on the streets of New York. A British reviewer of the novel recalled:

> In the mid-eighties Lester Coke, the boss of Jamaica's Tivoli Gardens neighbourhood, was the victim of a street robbery in Miami. He responded by tracking his assailant to a nearby crack house where he single-handedly killed everyone inside. The FBI only realised what had happened several years later. Their attempt to extradite Coke set in train a string of events that led to Coke being burned alive in a prison cell in Jamaica, his son Jah-T murdered while riding a scooter in central Kingston, and his youngest son, Christopher Coke, known as Dudus, becoming the boss of Tivoli Gardens.[5]

As was his real-life counterpart Lester Coke, Josey Wales is subsequently mysteriously burnt to death in a Jamaican prison cell, while awaiting extradition.

Crime and trauma

The major accomplishment of the novel is the manner in which it plausibly evokes the complex and irrational physical and mental worlds of the host of players which constitute a criminal community and those who fuel its machinations. Central to the narrative is the manner in which the entire society has become imbricated in the crime networks. This goes beyond the crimogenic nature of ghetto existence in which the communal welfare depends upon criminal networks, which the community in turn has a vested interest in shielding. The network figured in *A Brief History* includes law enforcement officers, transnational operators, politicians and, moving magically among all, the Singer who seeks always to build bridges and join hands.

The correlation between trauma and crime has been decisively made. These are the givens. Modern Caribbean societies were spawned in the crimes against humanity – a terrorist imperial system founded on the bedrock of the *encomienda* system which led to the genocide of indigenous tribes followed by the largest mass labour migration in human history – slavery and indentureship, both of which were buttressed by incredible enactments of mass terrorism. The attendant rupture of ancient cultural systems of gender and familial relations proved devastating. Cultural traumas are the inheritance of collectivities which envision themselves as wounded by historical violations.[6] Mediated by knowledge and cultural workers, like the iconic Bob Marley,

cultural traumas manifest in group assemblages and antipathies to sufferers who have had no direct experience of the traumatising catalyst, and impact the potential of collectivities to fully inhabit and realise the potentialities of their present-day existence.[7] These historical forces have thrust their rhizomic roots over time and transnational space to produce social worlds of incredible savagery, violence and violation. The epistemic violence of racism, colourism and classism which have become the kingpin of the postcolonial social order, relegates segments of the society to entrenched poverty and underdevelopment. Cultural trauma in turn feeds into insidious trauma – minute traumatising catalysts inherent to the social framework layer incrementally to bring the individuals and communities to the breaking point. Insidious trauma is implicated in mental health challenges which may include the onset of neuroses.[8]

The fact that trauma theory emerged out of the imperative to understand the Nazi Holocaust begs the question of what literary trauma can bring to the table in terms of addressing mind-boggling violence and resistant social issues. On the simplest level, trauma theory speaks to psychic and societal woundedness which intrudes into the conscious mind seeking articulation and ordering into narrative. The pivotal facet of this narrative is not fidelity to the facts surrounding the submerged, fragmented and dissonant traumatic experience, but fidelity to the experiential truth of what Cathy Caruth terms "the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (my emphasis). She continues, "[I]f Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing."[9] Dominick LaCapra, building on this connection, argues that literature is particularly useful for grappling with trauma because of its capacity to gesture towards excess. LaCapra indicates that writing trauma, as distinct from writing about trauma,

> involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analysing and 'giving voice' to the past – processes of coming to terms with traumatic 'experiences', limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridised forms.[10]

Reacting to the impulse of evasive histories and contrived archives and other official repositories of collective memory to sanitise and homogenise

national narratives, Ramu Nagappan points to the paradoxical potential of fiction to give voice to fragments: "The fragment is a contingent narrative, a record that until now has remained unacknowledged or undiscovered."[11] This in turn can impact public discourse, cultural reception and, perchance, even spark constructive conversations about complicity and blame. While none of these positions adequately addresses the problematic of languaging social suffering, all speak to the power of the literary imagination to strain towards the unknown and the unknowable, which is the stuff of trauma.

Historical wounds and their contemporary outworking

Marlon James's fiction points to narrative fragments and wounds that speak, culpability and complicity as he maps an inhospitable location at which rhizomes of oppressive and unjust transnational histories sprout intergenerationally, venomously and fatally in nations, communities and individuals. He gives voice to a multiplicity of intersecting narratives and worlds which demonstrate how poverty and harsh social conditions, compounded by political exploitation of the impoverished and disempowered for partisan advantage, and by brutal day-to-day abuse by state authorities, give rise to savaged and savage individuals who are ghettoised victims of cultural trauma and dread perpetrators of direct trauma. This dynamic is fuelled by United States involvement in the internal politics of developing states, as well as the gang's involvement in transnational criminal networks.

Copenhagen City don Papa-Lo muses gently that "ghetto people not used to full night sleep" (90). The very peacefulness of the night becomes a basis for hyperarousal, an imperative of alertness because the quietness must be masking mayhem. In this scenario, to inhabit time and space is to inhabit an inhumane domain which disallows rest and peace. People of the ghetto chronically experience all of the stressors which the American Psychiatric Association's manual for assessment and diagnosis of mental disorders defines as generating direct psychological trauma: "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence in one or more of following ways": through "direct experience"; through "witnessing in person" the traumatising event occurring to others; through coming to terms with the impact of the traumatising catalyst on a close family member or friend; and through experiencing "repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of such

events".[12] Layered on historical violations, this tightly interrelated web of trauma catalysts can in turn produce monstrous modes of being. Deborah Thomas argues that spectacular exceptional violence of slavery's terrorist system, with its focus on visuality and performativity, has generated repertoires in collective memory which nourish unjust social relations and virulent gang violence in contemporary times.[13]

James is careful to take on board a vast array of catalysts which produce the grim social phenomenon. The gangs are comprised, for the most part, of young persons traumatised and abused by poverty, inadequate parenting, and state injustices. Several young black males attempt to choose a nonviolent pathway only to find this intention short-circuited by a corrupt and brutal police force.[14] They in turn join pseudo families of paternalistic dons and, by extension, become pawns of politicians who set out to use gangs for political advantage, only to find that they have triggered incendiary violence which they can no longer control. They are also used by international operators planted on the islands to secure the objectives of foreign governments.

Banal violence and violation

This essay takes its title from the musings of a street child of the ghetto named Bam-Bam:

> And killing don't need no reason. This is ghetto. Reason is for rich people. We have madness . . . Madness is walking up to a good street downtown and seeing a woman dress up in the latest fashion and wanting to go straight up to her and grab her bag, knowing that it is not the bag or the money that we want so much, but the scream, when she see you jump right into her pretty up face and you could slap the happy right out of her mouth and punch the joy right out of her eye and kill her right there and rape her before or after you kill her because that is what rudeboys like we do to decent women like her. (9)

The madness of the ghetto which does not yield to rational and linear explanations becomes accessible if one focuses on traumatic outworking of psychic pain as an explanation for the irrational murderous violence of the veritable army of rude boys. It signals the manner in which the narrative works both to figure underlying causes and to undercut the same. Even in Bam-Bam's understanding, the robbery, rape and mayhem constitute madness.

On the other hand, it is eruptive violence spawned in the ruptures in his early family life and his tenuous relational connection to his whoring, hyper-sexualised mother and her murderous man friends, and to his frustrated, wife-beating, emasculated father. Within the trigger-happy adult male, there remains the terrorised child who witnesses the slaughter of both his parents in a single night as they beat, maim and facilitate the murder of each other in blind rage like puppets jerked around by deep-rooted, death-dealing impulses and horrific life circumstances: "My mother run back in and start to laugh and kick my father and Funnyboy go up to her and shoot her in the face. She fall right on top of me, so when he say find the little boy they look everywhere but under my mother" (13). In a complex image of rebirthing, the child is saved from the murderers his mother brings home to take revenge on his father, when her lifeless body falls on him and hides him. The bloodied orphan later crawls from under the mother's dead body to flee into his fate carrying his only legacy of value – his father's oversized Clarks shoes. Savaged in infancy by grim societal conditions and parental death, the street child suffers symptoms of separation and individuation trauma including dissociation and distancing, leading to the incapacity to connect and empathise with, or feel the pain of, others. This fictional representation fleshes out medical research which points to a dose-related correlation between childhood trauma and adult criminal activity: the higher the number of traumatising catalysts, the greater the propensity for the victims to drift into adverse criminal activity.[15]

As parentless spawn of the ghetto, the orphan is picked up by the gang network which lends the only sense of belonging he knows. Given excellent tutelage, he is wielding a gun by age ten, under the substitute authority and pater-familial protection of the gangland don. Bound on cycles of uncanny repetition, Bam-Bam – whose name echoes the sound of gunfire – is beyond trigger-happy. His entire being is set on swift and automatic resort to violence. The metonymic association between the gun and the street-child-turned-bad-man is so tightly fused that he has no other identity or name. The wounded, fragile self, propped up by bravado and ego retrieval, is further buttressed by the power of the gun which assumes its own God-like agency through its power to take life. Fitting neatly into the void left by the incapacity to form secure human attachments, the gun through a grotesque intimacy is personified as a live-in partner, which in turn changes the terms of interaction within every other actual and potentially intimate and chance

encounter: "*Is a hell of a thing* when a gun come home to live with you . . . Everybody talk to you different when them see a new bulge in you pants . . . When a gun come to live in the house it's the gun, not even the person who keep it, that have the last word" (72, my emphasis). Together Bam-Bam and the gun enter into an unholy union which produces a provocative bulge in his pants, a fitting appendage to his edgy and violent hypermasculinity. It refashions all other relational connections, eliciting new levels of obedience and deference within the most mundane of interactions because it infuses the most innocuous conversation which does not go his way with the potential for swift and irreversible reprisal meted out through the barrel of a gun. Personhood, communicative ability, communal affirmation and male authority shift from the diminished man to the overdetermined gun. The gun has a particular potency as opposed to the weapons which it has supplanted. There is no longer need for the hand-to-hand engagement, as is the case of the stick, machete, razor and switchblade. It allows for measure of distance just in case proximity invites recognition of shared vulnerability and humanity.

This unholy union, built on the foundation of lack of moral sense and empathy, combines with fragile hypermasculinity, hyperarousal and underlying hopelessness. To anesthetise the pain and emptiness of the past and the inescapable hopelessness of the present, Bam-Bam succumbs to drug addiction which provides the only momentary anodyne for his pain and the only ecstasy which he can experience. Add a snort of cocaine and Bam-Bam is placed on automatic pilot as rapist and killer overcome by the indiscriminate desire to "fuck fuck fuck" and "kill kill kill" (244). The death-dealing impulse to inflict pain which acts as momentary anodyne is translated in his psyche as power. Given this dynamic, the mere existence of decency, joy, beauty, order, prosperity, as reflected in the unknown happy woman on the street, is emblematic of loss which begs to be violently snuffed out. James's narrative thus puts a different, new spin on the affective responses, the fear, withdrawal and distancing predictably manifested in middle- and upper-strata women in response to a rude boy's proximity in a public place. He suggests that the latter also experiences affective responses such that the mere sight of the secure, happy woman can generate impulses towards violation and murder.

James produces an evocative representation of the mutually reinforcing connection between childhood trauma and youth victimisation and the perpetration of violence. While distancing and dissociation protect trauma

victims from immediate psychological distress, the desensitisation and the overwhelming void at the core of their beings, alongside the drugs which they use to anesthetise their pain, make them deadly perpetrators of violence, and the cycle continues. The outcome is an evocative fictional sketch of disturbingly real scenarios in which gang violence is not seen as an aberration or a deviant choice. Indeed, for the street spawn of the ghetto, the death-dealing dynamic becomes so normalised, their prevailing perception is that there is no choice. For this population, their lives are a constant round of grief, death, anxiety, depression and fear, which in turn exacerbate and deepen trauma symptoms of hypervigilance and hyperarousal, avoidance, dissociation and void. The gang is family. Its stringent standards of loyalty are violently entrenched. The performative, banal, daily acts of violence answer to an inherent theatricality – a deadly play enacted before a collective gaze – which infuses empty lives with skewed meaning. These collective meaning systems, though distorted, read for the participants in the play as clear and uncompromising.

Even the gang's impulse to turn on and eat its own answers to a skewed logic. Bam-Bam is bewildered when the gang leader turns on him, but not before his crazed mind repeatedly contemplates killing the emerging gang leader for rushing in for a kill and stealing his thunder. The community is so diseased and counts life so cheaply, that slaying its own sons and daughters gives no pause. Bam-Bam dies as he has lived. The pathway which leads to his youthful bewildering death at the hands of fellow gang members parallels his rebirthing experience – flight from murderous gang members, wallowing through masses of filth and garbage, ravenous hunger, all the while bemoaning his lack of understanding at a loss of meaning and place within the brutal pater-familial network on whose behalf he has killed and maimed since age ten. Ejected from the hostile and indifferent shelter of the gang and hunted like an animal, he is reduced to a bundle of base appetites, which externalises his absolute abjection and unbelonging.

Pre-scripted half lives

James's criminals sketched fulsomely in *A Brief History of Seven Killings* exist in a nightmarish twilight zone enacting stylised and even pre/scripted half-lives which, to borrow Judith Butler's formulation, are not perceived as "grievable".[16] The gangland ghetto charted by James is not simply a site of

social death, unrealised potential and truncated life chances, it also constitutes a swift pathway to physical death. Any opportunity of alleviation is denied when painful personal experiences and memories of abuse, abandonment and loss are multiplied myriad times over for multiple gang members. Individual anguish is mirrored in collective anguish. These repressed, unarticulated psychic pains flow into collective pools of cultural memory of loss – mother loss, father hunger, raw basic physical need, spiritual vacuums, abandonment and pain. Psychological trauma emanating from life-threatening events and psychosocial locations overlaid on collective cultural violations feeds into skewed communal worldviews. For the majority, there is no vision of an alternative lifestyle. There is no other life.

James's narrative also lends credence to notions posited by Dessa Kristen Bergen-Cico and others. These researchers argue that explorations of participation in street life, including gang activity, criminal behaviour, and illicit drug sale and use, tend to use theories of psychological deviance and anti-social behaviour as rebellion against dominant values of the majority. The researchers point to the fact that where these behaviours flourish they are perceived as "normative social behaviours serving as one of the most visible forms of authority".[17] They argue for the application of behavioural addiction theory if one is to disengage from street life and to avoid recidivism:

> While chaotic environments with high crime can adversely affect many community members, the type of "street action" explored in this study can also create an alluring "rush" that draws young unemployed men, and to a lesser extent young women, into the action of the streets, yielding outcomes that mirror behavioural addictions. Street crime and gang activity, if neurobiologically reinforced, might initiate a behavioural cycle for many of the participants with negative consequences for the wider community. Framing the draw of gang involvement as "street addiction" recognises both the environmental influence of street life and its potential to create psychological dependence in the analysis of such criminal behaviour.[18]

In addition, insights drawn from trauma filters would draw attention to affect – submerged repressed anguish which elicits emotional pain and affective responses which do not answer to reason; and therefore intervention based on thought and reason cannot readily address and reverse the toxic behaviours.

Never distant from the equation are colonial and neocolonial geopolitical

forces that drill down into the ghetto to produce the gang. Deborah Thomas argues persuasively that a focus on the complicity of US underworld political operatives in generating contemporary gang violence obscures connections between today's grim scenarios and imperialism's abuses. And James's focus disallows any summation which does not take regard of collusions among the neo-imperial state, Caribbean governments and politicians, an avaricious upper and middle class, and throwaway ghetto dwellers. Rhone Fraser, in his analysis of the novel, concludes: "Overall the novel is a cautionary tale about internalising hegemonic narratives that teach us to conform to an economy that profits from gun sales and drug addiction in order to create what Bob Marley has described in 'Redemption Song' as 'mental slavery'."[19]

While we may be prepared to take on board criminals who have been traumatised in their childhood and have consequently turned to a life of crime, we are not as accepting of the notion of perpetrators who have been traumatised by their own acts of violence. Saira Mohamed, in "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity", identifies perpetrator trauma as an "outlier in the scholarly judicial and popular understandings".[20] The definition of perpetrator as one who chooses to inflict suffering in an attempt to twist the meaning system of the victim, such that the perpetrator's capacity to exert pain becomes an affirmation of power, does not readily admit a diagnosis of trauma. Acknowledgement of the trauma of the victim establishes the right to bear witness, to be heard, to strip off victim status and to access a shared meaning system which signals reincorporation into the family of man. To accord such rights to perpetrators is perceived as unjust to victims and untenable within the broader societal order which would prefer to envision the perpetrator as monstrous and deserving of exclusion from grace, forgiveness and acceptance.

Papa-Lo, the loquacious don of Copenhagen City, is traumatised when he viciously attacks an innocent schoolboy whom he mistakes for a 'rudie'. At one level, his action breaches the unwritten moral code by which he and rival leader Shotta Sheriff maintain the order of their jungle – the morality which disallows the raping of church women and the murder of schoolgirls for their lunch money. It also comes after he stumbles upon an enviable scene of intergenerational love and respect – a grandson helping his aged and infirm grandfather – and realises that there are no old men in the ghetto. The scene inspires a hope for intergenerational connection and longevity which is

incompatible with his life work. The immediate horror of what he has done to the boy holds him enthralled in a close face-to-face encounter with his agency as an engineer of death. Empathetic identification seeps into his consciousness as he witnesses the slow and desperate demise of this innocent schoolboy unmediated by physical and psychic distance. His dying enters Papa-Lo's sensibility through numerous doors of perception: "[I]s one thing when you kill a man and he just dead. Is another thing when he too close when you shoot him and he grab you and you see the way he looking at you" (86). He feels death through the tactile sense when the boy grips him as in an attempt to "hold on to life". The nightmarish incident of his own taking lives haunts him, surfacing into his consciousness unbidden. This intrusive re-experiencing lies at the root of his subsequent incapacity to function effectively in a context in which authority is maintained by the ability to murder unflinchingly and in cold blood.

Within the framework in which death is an imminent probability as opposed to a distant possibility, the community is also peopled by ghosts – spirit-presences of the departed, bereft of bodies through which to enact vengeance against their killers. This vision is reflective of the African cosmologies which envision the universe as peopled by the living, the dead and the unborn. Embodied and disembodied spirits interface with each other, and determine the concourse of life on earth.[21] This assertion about individual existence after death fails to give comfort, because in James's universe there is decisively no rest for the wicked. The ghost of the murdered Sir Arthur Jennings is reflective of the societal trauma at numerous levels. Serving as a chorus on the unfolding action and empowered to speak only to the reader, he manifests most decisively when a character is about to die, which makes for his repeated intrusion into this far from brief history of killings. His ghastly wounded apparition externalises the function of trauma. He himself becomes its haunting, absent presence which never is fully digested and appropriated. In a bizarre reversal, he is the member of the privileged, hegemonic class, those who arguably in this life are spared the heinous ignominies of poverty and humiliation. In death, he haunts the boundaries of impoverished and violent communities. It is Jennings who becomes the marginalised, ignored, silenced, powerless. His quest for vengeance is bound to fail since he is bereft of even a despised, raced body which would facilitate enactment. In James's symbolic economy, death is indeed a great

leveller. The cautionary tale signals the possibility of an eternal realm in which the wealthy, the empowered, the corrupt and secure engineers of this living hell will reap the wages of their anarchies.

Save order from chaos

Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* raises a multiplicity of troubling issues. Writing a savage society peopled by impoverished, cynical, verbally and physically violent people, James raises issues about the nature and value of the human. His gangland characters inhabit alien meaning systems that only one living within their own unique hell can validate. James's work begs the questions: are these throwaway people or do they possess inherent value, and to what extent are their strivings and murderous actions and intent related to a quest for significance? If, as I argue, this epic of violence and violation can be read as a trauma narrative in which the major perpetrators are themselves represented as victims of cultural trauma which runs through the bloodstream of their inheritance, and of the insidious trauma which is inherent to their social order, then the writing which can be read as an attempt to "save order from chaos" (343) demands an affective response, as we bear witness.

This is not unproblematic. We read as situated subjects bringing to the engagement individual sensibilities produced by positionalities of time, space, ideologies, national and personal histories, and more. Trauma narratives demand empathetic attention and identification. Some deal with this by eluding or erasing representations of perpetrators so as to soften or alleviate the psychic pain of reading and writing. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*[22] subtly and evasively explores this problematic. Antoinette plays the innocent when the husband questions her about a location named Massacre. This is juxtaposed to a consistent symbolic identification between Antoinette and the enslaved, culminating in her leap from the battlements of the cold English mansion to an illusory hope of her black childhood playmate's welcome. Not so Marlon James. He delves into the evil savagery with apparent relish, while seeking to elicit measured empathetic identification with his traumatised perpetrators. Our task as critical readers is to enter into the narrative world and yet avoid appropriation of indirect trauma in a manner which eclipses the sufferers, substituting in their place a fixation with

the discomforts of bearing witness. Conversely, the task is also to avoid unchecked empathy and idiopathic identification, characterised by immersion into the alien and alienating value system and a psychic absorption into and possession by the violent and violating characters and scenarios. The requirement then is to read, understand and retain ethical self-awareness so as to frame an effective critical response to James's worlds. My own persistence in reading this excruciatingly violent and violating narrative was alleviated only by the conviction that there had to be a gem to be mined out of the muck. The gem which I sought was the ideological framework or worldview which accounts for the making of self and community within the savage scenario; the social enactments and material practices that support these diverse and brutal modes of being and becoming.

Judith Butler's notions of precarity and grievable lives prove helpful in this regard. Butler argues that although precariousness is a fundamental facet of all human lives, our capacity to read some lives as possessing value and therefore as grievable is determined by the framework through which we apprehend or fail to apprehend persons as losable and injurable. Butler indicates that the power dynamics which craft knowledge economies, shape epistemological and ontological approaches to targeted groups. The ontological queries indicate ways we interrogate what is a human life; or we determine given adverse and inhumane life conditions; or we construct a way to be human.[23] This becomes more relevant when dealing with populations who enter into the world within enclaves already tainted by social death. Bam-Bam testifies, "By the time boy like me drop out of my mother, she give up. Preacher say there is a god shaped void in everybody life but the only thing ghetto people can fill a void with is a void" (9). To use Butler's formulation, since the ontology of the body is social, it is only social and political forces that give the body its meaning: "The body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality – including language, work and desire – that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing."[24] For Bam-Bam and his fellow travellers, their framing within the hegemonic order and even their essentialised counter-discursive stance to their persistent marginalisation both point to death and not life. This is the impulse which drives the "fuck and kill" (244) mantra. Hence they enter into what Gordon Rohlehr terms a culture of "terminality".[25]

Butler's analysis of conditions under which contemporary wars are waged is relevant for this war as well:

> [T]he shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as "destructible" and "ungrievable". Such populations are "lose-able", can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable since, in the twisted logic that rationalises their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of "the living".[26]

Butler argues against such othering and scapegoating, and for a recognition of a common position of vulnerability and precariousness which is shared by the entire human family.

This essay argues that we cannot afford to relegate criminals to the dung heap. This assumption is predicated on hypocritical notions of pristine innocence of the engineers of the transnational, regional, state and hegemonic social orders. That aside, the hardened criminals' inability to rest, their agitation and hyperarousal, their cold-bloodedness, lack of empathy and emotional connection, their incapacity to experience guilt and remorse, their dissociation and cyclic repetition of murderous violence, their culturally accepted repertoire of brutal practices and social enactments arguably manifest the complex overlay of traumas which stand in need of targeted therapeutic interventions. By deploying the fictional strategy of polyvocality and stream of consciousness, James gives voices to myriad sensibilities and demonstrates the extent to which persons may inhabit the same spaces but live in vastly divergent mental worlds and meaning systems. The strategy lends voice to those who are generally silenced within hegemonic discourse, who live in accordance with meaning systems that only inhabitants of that hellish nightmare can validate. Arguably, entry into voice may well be a welcome alternative for those who currently act out through violence in the absence of an alert and respectful audience and a capacity to tell. The narrative strategy conveys a sense of the ordinariness and humanity of the perpetrator of mass violence. To borrow Saira Mohamed's formulation, James's fierce and enraged monsters are fragile men, and his capacity to persuasively, simultaneously

sketch their monstrosity and their humanity is testimony to his craft. James's vast canvas demolishes carefully constructed barriers between 'them' and 'us', and constrains acknowledgement of collective responsibility which in turn carries a responsibility for collective intervention. James's provocative representation disallows the facile solution of relegating monsters to the outer darkness beyond the pale of social order, excluded from the commonwealth and wellbeing.

NOTES

1. See Robert L. Ayres, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1998); and Alessandra Heinemann and Dorte Verner, *Crime and Violence in Development: A Literature Review of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006).
2. Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (London: Oneworld, 2014). Subsequent page references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.
3. This objective was laid out in the call for papers for this compilation, then titled "Crime and Its Representation in the Anglophone Caribbean". The call also posed the question: "How can understanding crime via its humanistic, historical, cultural, political and socioeconomic representations improve our general understanding of how crime has to come to function as action, control, and more?"
4. The notion is related to Toni Morrison's concept of "unspeakable things spoken" which points to silences and absences constituting loud declarations of origins and continuities – see Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, University of Michigan, 7 October 1988, https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf.
5. Nicholas Blincoe, review of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, by Marlon James, *Telegraph*, 14 November 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11213049/A-Brief-History-of-Seven-Killings-by-Marlon-James.html.
6. Paula Morgan, *The Terror and the Time: Banal Violence and Trauma in Caribbean Discourse* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2014).
7. This correlation is succinctly expressed in Derek Walcott's poem "Laventille" as manifesting the dark underbelly of imperialism and its horrendous outgrowth:

   Something inside is laid wide like a wound,
   some open passage that has cleft the brain,
   some deep, amnesiac blow. We left

somewhere a life we never found,
customs and gods that are not born again,
some crib, some grille of light
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld
us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements we're still bound.

– see Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 85.

8. See Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels", *Studies in the Novel* 40, nos. 1–2 (2008): 1–12; Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef, *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence in Caribbean Discourse* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006); and Morgan, *Terror and the Time*.
9. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 2–3.
10. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 186.
11. Ramu Nagappan, *Speaking Havoc: Social Suffering & South Asian Narratives* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005), 28.
12. American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 309:81; F43.10.
13. Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence*: *Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 106.
14. Danielle Watson, Lee Michael Johnson, Nathan Pino, and Paula Morgan, "Police Perceptions of Residents in a High-Crime Area in Trinidad and Tobago: Community Framing and Crime Wars", *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895819858372; Danielle Watson, Francis D. Boateng, Nathan Pino, and Paula Morgan, "The Interface between Exercise of State Power and Personal Powerlessness: A Study of Police Perceptions of Factors Impacting Professional Practices", *Police Practice and Research* 19, no. 5 (2018): 458–71.
15. James Reavis, Jan Looman, Kristina Franco, and Briana Rojas, "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Criminality: How Long Must We Live Before We Possess Our Own Lives?", *Permanente Journal* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 44–48.
16. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009).
17. Dessa Kristen Bergen-Cico, Arnett Haygood-El, Timothy Noble Jennings-Bey, and Sandra D. Lane, "Street Addiction: A Proposed Theoretical Model for Understanding

the Draw of Street Life and Gang Activity", *Addiction Research and Theory* 22, no. 1 (2014): 15–26, https://doi.org/10.3109/16066359.2012.759942.

18. Ibid., 2.
19. Rhone Fraser, "Confronting Neocolonialism: An Evaluation of Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*", *Caribbean Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (March 2017): 79.
20. Saira Mohamed, "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity", *Columbia Law Review* 115, no. 5 (June 2015): 1163.
21. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).
22. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1966).
23. Butler, *Frames of War*, 13–15.
24. Ibid., 6.
25. "Already we have a significant cadre of youth who don't seem to me to believe anything, even their own lives, even the value of their own lives. The casual way with which they take lives and in which they seem to surrender their own is a signal that we are already, in that respect, at what I have termed terminality, that is definitely a worst case – terminality. The question is how do we turn that kind of thing around. I can't say I know" – Gordon Rohlehr, interview by Paula Morgan, in "From Apocalypse to Awakenings – Interviews with Gordon Rohlehr", *Tout Moun: Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no.1 (October 2013): 4, https://journals.sta.uwi.edu/toutmoun/papers/oct13/Tout_Moun_2_MORGAN_Rohlehr_Interviews.pdf.
26. Butler, *Frames of War*, 31.