BEARING WITNESS
FOUR DAYS IN WEST KINGSTON
BY DEBORAH A. THOMAS
The new Penn Museum exhibition *Bearing Witness* had its genesis in a disturbing event that took place in Jamaica in 2010. Over the course of four days, at least 75 residents of a community were killed in a confrontation with local authorities. Professor Deborah A. Thomas and her colleagues Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn and Dr. Deanne Bell documented the stories of survivors who witnessed the violence and lost family members. These interviews comprise an ethnography of “making life in and through violence” and are the basis of the exhibition *Bearing Witness*. 
During the week of May 24, 2010, members of the police force and the Jamaican Army entered the West Kingston community of Tivoli Gardens to apprehend Christopher “Dudus” Coke, who had been ordered for extradition to stand trial in the United States on gun- and drug-running charges. In August 2009, when the U.S. issued the extradition request for Coke, Bruce Golding, then Prime Minister, leader of the Jamaica Labour Party, and Member of Parliament for Tivoli Gardens, argued against the extradition on the procedural grounds that the evidence against Coke was obtained by wiretapping, which is illegal under Jamaican law. But, by the third week in May 2010, under pressure from Parliament and the U.S. government, Golding announced to the nation on television that he had authorized the Attorney General to sign the extradition order. This led to a standoff between the security forces that had to find Coke—“don” of the Tivoli Gardens community and therefore benefactor as well as gang leader—and many of Coke’s supporters who were bent on protecting him at any cost. By the end of the week, Coke had not yet been found and at least 75 civilians were officially recognized as having been killed (the number community members give is closer to 200).

The government established a curfew for Tivoli Gardens, and residents were forced to show passes when leaving or entering. Most movement into or out of the demarcated zone was effectively stopped, which meant that many people were unable to work, go to school, shop for food, or go about the ordinary routines of their lives. This continued for almost a month until June 22, when Coke was detained and subsequently extradited. At his trial on August 30, 2011, Coke pled guilty to charges of racketeering and distribution of marijuana and cocaine, and he was sentenced in June 2012 to 23 years, which he is currently serving in a medium-security prison in South Carolina.

Despite the immediate activities of various civil society organizations, it took almost three years for the Office of the Public Defender to submit an interim report to the Jamaican Parliament regarding the conduct of the security forces. While the Commission of Enquiry that was called for by the Public Defender’s Report of April 2014 finally got underway in December of that year, a full list of the dead has still not been released.

Documenting the Aftermath

These are the events that were the impulse for this project, which began in 2012 as a sort of visual ethnography, an attempt to bear witness, with all its attendant complexities and complications. Dr. Deanne Bell, a Jamaican psychologist now teaching at the University of East London, had attended a screening at New York University of the film John Jackson, Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn,
and I directed called Bad Friday: Rastafari after Coral Gardens. That film documented the 1963 Coral Gardens “incident”—members of the Rastafari community call it a massacre—a moment just after independence when the Jamaican government rounded up, jailed, and tortured hundreds of Rastafarians as the result of a land dispute. This incident was largely forgotten by most Jamaicans outside of a handful of Rastafari activists in western Jamaica and a few prominent spokespersons, and it was not reliably remembered even among Rastafari, especially the youth.

After viewing Bad Friday, Deanne approached Junior and me about creating something similar addressing the state of emergency in 2010, a film or other visual work that would provide a platform for people in Tivoli Gardens and surrounding communities to talk about their experiences during the week of May 24 and to publicly name and memorialize loved ones they lost. Initially, I resisted. Bad Friday, I argued, was possible because of the long-standing ties we had to the community and the relationships we were able to create with individuals who had already been attempting to document the elders’ stories. It was also possible because the situation was no longer “hot,” as it were, not part of the ongoing conflicts that have characterized political life in independent Jamaica. Not having any ties to, or contacts within, Tivoli, and the sense of being in the thick of things regarding the still unresolved events of 2010, seemed to mitigate against doing anything there. Deanne persisted, however, and with the help of a few key figures, including the American journalist Mattathias Schwartz, who generously connected us with the people with whom he had worked most closely in order to write his 2011 New Yorker article, “A Massacre in Jamaica,” we began our project together in early 2012.
Over the intervening years, we recorded about 30 oral histories, and we amassed a variety of additional materials, including the footage from the U.S. drone that was overhead during the operation (again, due to Mattathias Schwartz’s generosity), archival film and stills of the community itself, photography (both portraits of our interviewees and pictures taken by community youth during a workshop we ran with Ken Lum of Penn Design and three undergraduates in August 2013), and additional video from a guided walk through the community in January 2014 (again, with the participation of Penn graduate students). We also obtained emails and cables between personnel within the U.S. consulate in Kingston and their counterparts in Washington, DC. On several occasions, we convened the people who shared their experiences with us to show them drafts of our work in order to receive feedback, and to make sure we were walking the fine line they asked us to when we began working with them, a line that reflects their negotiation of dual power structures—that of the state and that of the Coke family. There was an immediacy to our work with residents in West Kingston, one that operated quite differently from the temporal frame that contextualized Bad Friday.

Both projects, however, stand as attempts to witness and to archive state violence, and to give some sense of how the practices and performances of state sovereignty—and the attempts to create life alongside, through, and in opposition to it—have changed over time. Although I have also written a book that takes the “Tivoli Incursion” as its starting point, what has been possible for us to enact in the sphere of the visual is not legible in academic prose. The proximity of juxtapositions—of scale, of perspective, and of time—is impossible to render on the page. And the affective engagements we have sought to reflect and generate through the production and editing decisions that we have made, as well as the dynamics of the present that condition these decisions, cannot be fully captured or represented through language.

Affective engagements are unpredictable, and presenting research in different modalities (a book, a film, a museum exhibition) might produce different kinds of engagements. Ideally, our visual and my textual work would be encountered together, with each speaking to the gaps in the other without necessarily seeking to resolve them into one seamless story. Ultimately, the stories we seek to tell with this exhibition and in our other film work about making life in and through violence—institutionalized and imagined, past and present—require that we pay attention to both embodied and intellectual modes of analysis, and that we think deeply about our own relationships to the places and people we study.

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Bearing Witness: Four Days in West Kingston was co-curated by Dr. Deborah A. Thomas; Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn, AV Productions; and Dr. Deanne M. Bell, Senior Lecturer, Psychology, University of East London. Also on the curatorial team were current and former Ph.D. students Osei Alleyne, Leniqueca Welcome, and David Chavannes.