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Scammer's Yard: the crime of Black repair in Jamaica

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Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica, by Jovan Scott Lewis, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 248 pp., \$27.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5179-0998-7

Scammer's Yard follows the lives of Omar, Junior and Dwayne, three Jamaican ghetto youths, as they go about their lottery scam operation in the early 2010s. The lottery scam essentially entails the illegal collection of money from North American pensioners whose contact information is acquired by means of contact or lead lists generated in the US. The scammers inform the victims that they have won a vast amount of money from a lottery and ask them to make payments to cover the fees pertaining to the management of their unexpected gains. The victims then transfer money regularly to the scammers through international money transfer services such as Western Union or MoneyGram. While limited to a relatively small scale, Omar, Junior and Dwayne's operation provided significant financial revenues for young men coming from an underprivileged background. In other cases, the lottery scam business has generated gains for the scammers amounting to several hundred thousand US dollars.

The first chapter of the book situates the lottery scam and the scammers within the context of underdevelopment and poverty in Jamaica. It establishes the notion of 'sufferation', a Jamaican term for 'suffering', as a conceptual framework to discuss Omar, Junior and Dwayne's situation in post-independence Jamaica and in the tourism-industry driven area of Montego Bay. Interestingly, sufferation is read not only as a socioeconomic concept but as an ontological condition related to the consequences of slavery in postcolonial Jamaica, marked by a radical lack of opportunity for economic gain and social advancement. In that sense, 'the plantation remains' (p. 25) and sufferation becomes a defining feature of Blackness in diasporic African communities.

The second chapter analyses the scam in light of the structural adjustment policies that have regulated Jamaica's economy since the 1970s. It locates this practice in the broader context of late neoliberal capitalism and the financial flows between Jamaica and the US. It analyses how the three young men's operations take place in new spaces created by recent developments of financial capitalism and shows how the scammers take advantage of business practices that have become ubiquitous under the influence of the US banking sector, as well as of the training they have received to become telemarketing operators in the call centres and 'free zones' of the Montego Bay area (p. 59).

The third chapter provides an ethical reading of the scam as an activity perceived – and punished – as illicit. It questions the criminal nature of the scam, given that the generation and trade of lead lists is generally regarded as legal when they are carried out by US business operators. The use of these lists by young, poor, black Jamaican men, on the other hand, has come to be regarded as criminal and raises serious legal and moral concerns, notably in media narratives. Through a detailed analysis of court cases involving Jamaican scammers, the chapter focuses on the criminalisation of sufferers as part of the racialisation of moral categories, reflecting on 'the color of crime' (p. 97). It tries to ascertain what exactly is illegal in the scam, relating this analysis to the ethical representations and values of the scammers and their victims.

The fourth and final chapter establishes the scam as a form of Black repair. It situates the scam within wider conversations about reparations for the crime of slavery, showing how the scammers see this practice as a way to enhance their socioeconomic status and opportunities, thereby effectively creating a form of repair for their sufferation. The chapter reflects upon the individual(istic) nature of the kind of repair claimed by scammers, contrasting it with the collective dimension that lies at the core of the sense of Blackness, and hence of older claims for reparations. In

doing so, it opens new avenues to think about ways of 'repairing Blackness' in Jamaica, the Caribbean and the African diaspora (p. 139).

Scammer's Yard is a notable book in many ways. Unlike many recent scholarly works, it does not burden itself with jargonish metatheoretical commentary. Instead, the ethnographic study of Omar, Junior and Dwayne's scam serves as a narrative arc and provides structural unity to the book. The analysis of the scam at the microlevel is elegantly situated within its broader socioeconomic context and recent theoretical debates. The story of Omar, Junior and Dwayne is not used as a pretext to justify a theoretical stance, but it is this story that compels Jovan Scott Lewis and his readers to think about certain conceptual frameworks in a new light.

The book is also fascinating by its adept use of various disciplinary strands. The focus on the relatively small operation of Omar, Junior and Dwayne requires the use of a broad range of conceptual tools for all its implications to be successfully explicated. Jovan Scott Lewis then mobilises notions and methods taken from such diverse fields as sociology, anthropology, economics, history, philosophy and ethics, or postcolonial and race studies. This leads to a new sense of what geography can mean, for the three young men and their spatial practices in relation to the scam, but also as an academic discipline.

Scammer's Yard argues that the scam is a way for Omar, Junior and Dwayne to achieve a form of success outside of the fields of sports and culture, which constitute the only areas where young black Jamaican men have been able to make positive social and financial gains. Through an act of 'reparative seizure' (p. 23), the scammers pursue a form of autonomy and actualise their claim to reparations for their condition as sufferers, managing to invert (post)colonial power hierarchies in a productive – if illegal – manner. By moving away from charted territories of Caribbean studies and focusing on innovative and thought-provoking terrains, as well as on recent scholarly literature from the Caribbean, *Scammer's Yard* operates a similar gesture in the field of academic research. This enterprise appears as timely and necessary, both for an understanding of the role of Jamaica in the new geographies of the 21st century and for the future of Caribbean studies.

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