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# Archiving Violence

*a conversation on the making of Poto Mitan and Bad Friday*

## Mark Schuller and Deborah A. Thomas

TWO RECENTLY RELEASED films on the Caribbean—*Bad Friday* and *Poto Mitan*—build on ethnographic research to engage issues related to structural and material violence, social justice, human rights, and collaborative filmmaking.

Filmic representation has a long history within the discipline of anthropology, but we are far from the days of so-called “ethnographic film,”—those real-time representations of aspects of community life and practice that shape classics like *Nanook of the North*, or the *Axe Fight*. Today, anthropologists are using film and other forms of visual representation as methodological interventions and as dissemination strategies, often collaborating with research partners in order to create broader dialogues about the issues they face, and developing a contextual frame through which ethnographic work can more obviously be positioned as a kind of relation of complicity.

In other words, both these films place their subject matter within the broad geopolitical and neoliberal circuits that envelop us all, thereby identifying the various ways in which filmmaker and story, ethnographer and research subject, are part of one set of systems and processes. Documentaries also exemplify the potential to respond to calls within anthropology to be, what Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry call more “public” and “engaged.”

*Bad Friday: Rastafari after Coral Gardens* is a documentary film that focuses on a community of Rastafarians in western Jamaica who annually commemorate the 1963 Coral Gardens “incident,” a moment just after independence when the Jamaican government rounded up, jailed, and tortured hundreds of Rastafarians. It chronicles the history of violence in Jamaica through the eyes of its most iconic community, and shows how people use their recollections of past traumas to imagine new possibilities for a collective future. Directed by Deborah A. Thomas and John L. Jackson, Jr., the film highlights a local story that plays out on a global stage, raising critical questions about what community and citizenship look like in the 21st century among a population that is actively grappling with legacies of Western imperialism, racial slavery, and political nationalism—the historical foundations of contemporary



**Banana woman.** Video still from *Poto Mitan*. ©2009 Documentary Educational Resources.

violence throughout the Americas. *Bad Friday*, produced by Deborah A. Thomas, John L. Jackson, Jr., Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn, and Junior “Ista J” Manning, was released in 2011, and is being distributed by Third World Newsreel.

*Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, is told through the compelling lives of five courageous Haitian women workers, giving the global economy a human face. Each woman’s personal story explains neoliberal globalization, how it is gendered, and how it impacts Haiti: inhumane working/living conditions, violence, poverty, lack of education, and poor health care. While *Poto Mitan* offers in-depth understanding of Haiti, its focus on women’s subjugation, worker exploitation, poverty, and resistance demonstrates that these are global struggles. Finally, through their collective activism, these women demonstrate that despite monumental obstacles in a poor country like Haiti, collective action makes change possible. Codirected and coproduced by Renée Bergan and Mark Schuller, *Poto Mitan* was released in 2009 by Documentary Educational Resources.





Following is an excerpt from a November, 2012 conversation between two of the filmmakers.

**Mark Schuller:** How did *Bad Friday* come about?

**Deborah Thomas:** I was working on a book about violence in Jamaica and I knew that I wanted to do a chapter about state violence against members of the Rastafari community, and specifically about the Coral Gardens incident of 1963. All year during 2007, there were events organized to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, and one day I saw in the *Gleaner*, one of the daily newspapers, that there was going to be a commemoration of the Coral Gardens incident as part of the bicentenary events. Very little had been written about Coral Gardens, and what did exist used the *Gleaner's* reporting as primary sources. Analyses of what took place usually positioned the events at Coral Gardens as one incident within a series of “overreactions” by the Jamaican state right around the time of independence in

**Iyah V.**  
Still from *Bad Friday*. Photo credit: Deborah Thomas. ©2011 Deborah Thomas.

1962; overreactions to what seemed to them at the time to be radical threats. Anyway, Coral Gardens had always been in my head, but I never pursued it academically, and it wasn't part of a more general collective national memory.

**Schuller:** Why do you think that is?

**Thomas:** Partly I think it's because Rastafari has such an ambivalent position within the Jamaican national imagination. Everybody likes to talk about Bob Marley, and people all over the world know Jamaica because of reggae music and Rastafari but, in fact, there's been such an ongoing history of persecution by successive governments from 1930 on, and there's still some ambivalence towards Rastafari as part of the symbolic imaginary. Even now, I know that people directing the Ja-

**People directing the Jamaica Tourist Board don't want to use too many representations of Rastafari in their ads because for them, it still carries connotations of being unclean or not respectable.**

maica Tourist Board don't want to use too many representations of Rastafari in their ads because for them, it still carries connotations of being unclean or not respectable. As a result, there are two major silenced moments in Jamaican history. One is Coral Gardens, which occurred under a Jamaica Labour Party government, and the other is the Green Bay Massacre, which happened under a People's National Party government in the late 1970s. Storm Saulter, a Jamaican filmmaker, has done a fictional film about Green Bay, and we've done the

documentary on Coral Gardens. So I think now people are ready to start confronting these histories. This is after years of the Rastafari community organizing this commemorative event!

Anyway, I saw the announcement for the commemoration in 2007 and called my friend Junior "Gabu" Wedderburn, a drummer who used to tour with Urban Bush Women when I was dancing with them in the 1990s, and asked if he would go with me. He was interested because he is a Ras who grew up in Port Antonio and had never heard about Coral Gardens. We went to try to find Rastafari elders who went through the tribulations during that time, to get beyond the newspaper reporting, to hear the personal stories of what this event meant to them, and for the community as a whole. We came back and followed up with one of these elders about six months later, after I had done more reading and archival work, and I asked him whether he would walk through the landscape with us, retracing his steps and showing us where various things had happened to him, and he said he could do that, "but wouldn't it be better to do it on film?" I was surprised, but said, "of

course. Everything is better on film!” Since my husband, John Jackson, is a filmmaker I thought we could make it happen.

That began a four-year process—lots of trips back and forth finding elders who suffered, and lots of detective work trying to understand “what really happened” because so many of these elders did not initially know why they were being persecuted. Rastafari all over western Jamaica were being rounded up because of a land dispute in Coral Gardens, just outside of Montego Bay, but in most cases they didn’t know about the dispute until information passed from person to person in the jails and holding cells where they were taken. Many of them didn’t know the story themselves, so actually tracking down people who were there at that time and knew what the history was in that community and understood that particular estate, those particular actors, those workers, took a long time.

At the same time, we weren’t necessarily invested in finding one definitive truth; we were interested in the gaps and discrepancies in people’s stories, and this is what we try to show in the film, because these different versions of the story also express the different truths that are important to community members, both then and now. Still, we wanted to frame the story more broadly in relation to violence, state formation, and the past five hundred years of Western modernity. But other than that, we just wanted to make it very open, and in the end, we wanted to document this incident

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through the voices of those who experienced it. And finally, we wanted to support the efforts of the community to generate more awareness about Coral Gardens and to get the government to respond in some kind of way, to apologize or to support a reparations claim, to acknowledge that this happened—that the newly independent Jamaican state would repress and torment its own citizens. There are many people in Jamaica who still didn’t know about Coral Gardens, so we feel satisfied that the community is happy with the film and that we have had a role in generating more awareness about it. We premiered the film at the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, and it has also screened on television a few times, and the community continues to show it at various events.

We had our first “sneak preview” screening at the Coral Gardens commemoration in 2011 and the Public Defender was there. The community had been lobbying him for a long time to pick up a reparations case for them and he had not been willing to do it, but after he saw the film, he changed his mind. His office launched its own investigation; they went out to Montego Bay and took sworn testimony from the elders and then began collecting corroborative evidence with the aim

of presenting the case to the government, so hopefully this will have a good result.

Basically, the film was a completely in-house job. Nobody was really adequately paid for their time or their work. The university supported it through funding the research trips, and paying for the usage fees for the archival footage, which was very expensive, as you know. And we paid Junior to develop a score, which is amazing.

Let's turn to *Poto Mitan*. What have the women in Haiti with whom you worked thought about *Poto Mitan*?

**Schuller:** Well, as an anthropologist who thinks about how to decolonize anthropology, as Faye Harrison challenges us to do, specifically, about how our research can be of use to the people with whom we work, I asked a women's NGO from my dissertation what thank you gesture they thought would be appropriate, and they said they wanted me to make a movie. And I said, "I'm going to write a book about you all," but they didn't think

**I said, "I'm going to write a book about you all," but they didn't think that was good enough. "Who's going to read your book?" they said.**

that was good enough. "Who's going to read your book?" they said. A Haitian proverb says, "seeing and hearing are two different things." And they were really, really persistent because they know the power of video and media to move people in a direct and emotional way to get them to be active. What we do as writers can inspire but it's mediated intellectually; so they wanted to take this directly to people here who buy the clothes that they sew, here in the United States, where the U.S. government is directing policy toward and even within Haiti. They wanted that direct contact and I said, "OK, I'll try." They said, "No, no, no, you're not going to try. You will do this."

It's really their film. Obviously we have our role as editors so it's mediated, but it's less mediated than perhaps it otherwise could have been. We made it a point every time we came back to do more work on the film to show them what we had so far and to ask where we should go with it. We had long discussions about who the audience should be, because for me it had to fit within the context of a fifty-minute introductory anthropology, global studies, Black studies, or Women's studies class.

**Thomas:** So you explicitly framed your audience as interested students in these various kinds of intro classes?

**Schuller:** As an activist scholar, I always have two primary audiences. I strive for my writing to be accessible to intro level classes. It's also accessible to the public. As a video, *Poto Mitan* can be shown in intro classes and also be shown at a woman's organization, a labor union, a solidarity group. A





longer film is too long for activist purposes. If you want to have a discussion in a two hour event, you only have thirty minutes for discussion. And the action alerts happens after the conversation. It has to happen organically or it's not going to happen at all. So I've always consciously had in mind those as two of my audiences in all of my work. I had my students at York College read my book as I was writing it to see how they understood it.

When we went back to the women with fifty minutes of a rough cut together, we were thinking it was almost done and so we were asking them what they liked and didn't like. We had provisionally used Vodou music to begin the film, a song about Legba who opens the gates, and we felt it was a really appropriate opener to the piece, like opening a ceremony. And the women hated it. They said, "You are not beginning this video with Vodou!" What struck Gina Ulysse, who worked with us as a consultant, was their savviness about how Haiti has been represented outside. These women were factory workers working with a women's NGO, and NGOs in Haiti, as I suspect elsewhere in Latin America, tend to be disproportionately Protestant because of their history and the genealogy of NGOization. While their first reaction seemed like that of church ladies, as the conversation developed, we understood that it wasn't just that they were personally offended (one was actually a manbo, a Vodou "priestess"), but that they were aware of Haiti's stereotypical image as being linked mostly to Vodou, which has a bad image. And Gina reminded me of that.

**Burning car.** Video still from *Poto Mitan*. ©2009 Documentary Educational Resources.



**Simba.**  
Still from *Bad  
Friday*. Photo  
credit: Deborah  
Thomas. ©2011  
Deborah  
Thomas.

It is the same with the question of violence. I personally am uncomfortable depicting violence because again Haiti has a stereotype. Haiti has a UN occupation, an imperialist occupation, legitimated by a violence that started in 2004 which was created by the U.S.-engineered removal of Aristide. True, Port-au-Prince has its share of violent crime but compared to other cities in the region, or my hometown of Chicago, the rate is actually far lower. So depicting the violence is doing violence to Haiti. There is a scene where people are behind the UN troops and they are being shot at, and another depiction of people walking over dead bodies after a particular conflict. My co-director and I have had different points of view on using these scenes. She's a visual artist and she wants to document the violence, but I said that showing it actually reinscribes the very thing that we're trying to work against. But the women disagreed with me, they wanted us to show more of the violence because it was their reality. They live with it. And they made it clear that we couldn't sanitize it because of my own poststructuralist feminist concerns about structural violence.

The other scene in the film that I hear about from my colleagues who show it in their classes has to do with an image of this obviously poor man wading through garbage to collect the recyclables so that he can make some money. I felt that the scene generated an easy pathos and wanted to take it out, but the women said we had to put it in there, again because it was their reality.

Then, because it took so long to make, the food riots broke out in 2008. This had to then enter the film because it had become part of their conversation. I had long understood—from these women and others—that the high cost of living was a central concern to Haiti's poor majority, but the riots made this issue discussable. We frame the whole film in relation to structural violence, about which the women themselves have an analysis. And it's unfortunate, but a lot of people tell me that they're surprised at how sophisticated the women's analyses are as organic intellectuals within Marxist feminism or intersectionality.

**Thomas:** Most people assume low-income people anywhere are dumb and that they don't have an analysis of their own situation.

**Schuller:** Right. But a full professor at a big research university asked me to define "neoliberalism" that the women articulate so well. So at every turn, as a participatory action research project, we let the women decide what should be in the film. The NGOs are using it and the conversations in Haiti about the film have been really good. And in classes in the U.S., it shows in words and images what they're reading about.

Our New York premiere was at Medgar Evers College, which is in the heart of Haitian Brooklyn, and we had three hundred people there at least, mostly Haitians who are passionate about their homeland, and we started



the conversation and then just took a step back and let it happen. We were wondering how it would go because we're both white; we're both foreign. But in the end, the post-screening discussion turned into metaconversations about Haiti in general, about U.S. policy, and we knew that it could be a vehicle for them to have a healthy conversation. Some people criticize the film for not including certain subjects.

**Thomas:** There will always be that. You can't be all things to all people. For us the audience question has also been interesting. In the beginning of making the film, we talked a lot about it because we were applying for funding and so we had to tailor a trailer to be legible to a U.S. audience. But Junior didn't like it, we didn't like it, and the community wouldn't have liked it, and we didn't get the funding anyway. So ultimately, we decided that the primary audience would be the community itself and beyond that, Jamaicans and those in diaspora,

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and beyond that, anyone interested in pan-Africanism, human rights, and reparations. So that's how we made our editing decisions. That's how we made our narrative decisions. That is how we made our music decisions. We decided that we didn't want expert talking heads, but we wanted to focus on the people who were affected by the incident. There is a little narration at the beginning of the film to set it up, but we don't do enough history for a U.S. audience to really understand what's happening, so the audience responses have

been very different. In the community, it's such a powerful identification for them to see themselves and to realize that this actually could go somewhere and have some kind of informational impact with black communities all over the world. For Jamaicans generally, it has struck people who have become aware of an aspect of our history that's just been completely submerged, but sometimes also when these audiences are confronted with descriptions of torture, they feel uncomfortable. In the diaspora, it's been very interesting because so few of the second-generation folk have heard of this. They come to Rastafari the way everybody else in the world does, which is generally through reggae music. This means they don't tend to know the history of state persecution, and this shocks them, but it also then generates dialogues between themselves and the first-generation migrants who are present and talking about things they remember that they are maybe sharing with their children for the first time.





**Schuller:** We made similar decisions because like you, the women in the film are the primary audience. Eight minutes elapse in the film before we have an “expert” interview, but it is difficult to navigate that boundary between wanting the story to unfold through the voices of the women and making it legible for a U.S. audience, especially for students. You have to assume that the audience is going to interpret it the way they want to interpret it. And so if they don’t get something, you make them work. We decided in the end that we needed to have something familiar, we needed to get the story out to reach people at a human level. We were looking for something to break up the narrative flow from time to time, like Stephanie Black did in *Life and Debt* with Jamaica Kinkaid’s writing.

Since the women work in the textile industry—literally sewing clothing—that became a metaphor. Part of the experience all over the diaspora is the mother-daughter relationship embodied in braiding hair. This is an intimate binding between women, so this became the visual metaphor for what the women in the film were doing through their work. And this was solidified for us while we waited for our sound assistant to get ready. While this was happening, his wife was braiding her daughter’s hair, so Renée just started filming! So it was organic, and Edwige Danticat had a very powerful and personal piece to close her *Krik? Krak!* about the same subject. Our two associate producers—Gina Ulysse and Claudine Michel, chair of Black Studies at UCSB—asked her if we could use it.

**Factory jeans.** Video still from *Poto Mitan*. ©2009 Documentary Educational Resources.



At a Miami fundraiser where she read from her autobiographical *Brother, I'm Dying*, Edwidge wrote us a check and said, "whatever you need; I will make sure this happens." I was so moved by this. We tweaked her words a little, but we used her structure, and this gave the film its structure. But we also made sure that the front and the back end of film showed positive images, beautiful images, of Haiti. We were trying to remind people that while there is the violence the women were experiencing, and the poverty, this is not the entire story of Haiti. Haiti has a rich tradition of oral history through art and literature, and this was one way to give them that. The music was another way to do this.

**Thomas:** The music was beautiful.

**Schuller:** Emeline Michel is one of the best known contemporary musicians, and we use her music in the opening sequence, but also to make bridges between the different sections. It's a very wistful song that talks about

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what she wishes Haiti could be, and we used it to sonically deal with the transformations from rural to urban life, from farming to having to participate in a neoliberal economy. We wanted to show that visually but also evoke it through music. And then the last song was by Manze Dayila whose "coming out" piece was a song for the 2008 Obama campaign that went viral. It's called, in English, "I want to be free," and it's a collaboration with hip hop artists.

It was upbeat, and so we left the film positive, but also contemporary and urban, because that's what the women represent. We wanted to leave the film on a positive note.

**Thomas:** You do. You have them organizing, not just suffering, and not just experiencing a litany of violence. You show them actively, in a substantial way, addressing their own situation.

**Schuller:** Yes, but for Renée, it still wasn't enough. She was looking for the Erin Brockovich, the triumphant final scene and the Hollywood ending. But there is no Hollywood ending when you have an earthquake.

**Thomas:** Life isn't Hollywood.

**Schuller:** So we end with their stories.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I actually appreciated that.

**Schuller:** I think this forces people into reflection. I mean, we don't want them to have an aesthetic response. We want them to have an emotional

response because they're people and these people tell us their stories and they taught us about global organization and liberalism, the impact of social violence and gender, and these people have a story to tell. We made the film before the earthquake, but since the earthquake, Haiti has become the object of so many films that seem like disaster porn. I find it disgusting.

**Thomas:** Well, it's the same kind of violence that you write about in the NGO book.

**Schuller:** Ultimately, I made this film because they wanted this film to be made. The film has done more for me and my career than I can ever possibly give back to them. But they get the funds and there is a kind of activism attached to it. If you go to our website, it takes people to action in various ways. We have 1,800 people getting our action alerts. We also have a lot of teaching tools on our website that are designed to get people to think about their own complicity in the various systems that link them, as American consumers, to the Haitian women who work in the textile industry. What the women are asking for is solidarity. They're asking for us to do our part.

**Thomas:** Yes, and in a practical, collaborative way. The dominant imagination is that these are people who need to be saved, because Americans in particular are not oriented toward viewing problems as structural and historical but instead as moral and individual. They think they have the power to save other people if they only can teach them the right way to do something or if they only can give them just a little bit of money to pull themselves out of a jam or because they don't have a sense of the sort of a broader structural framework. One film can't change this dominant orientation.

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**Schuller:** But we can track a qualitative assessment. Certainly after the earthquake, people come with their questions like the do-gooder: how can I help? They're looking for me to tell them which NGO is doing good work. And I always respond, what do the women themselves say? You have the power as a citizen . . .

**Thomas:** Yeah. To get the information on your own.

**Schuller:** There's a seat with your name on it but you're not sitting in it.

**Thomas:** You mentioned earlier that the funds go to Haiti. What exactly do you do with the profits?

**Schuller:** One hundred percent of the profits go to the women in the film and the grassroots organizations. We sat all of the groups down and



**Stage.** Still from *Bad Friday*. Photo credit: Junior "Gabu" Wedderburn. ©2008 Junior "Gabu" Wedderburn.

we said, "Well, how do we do this? How do we distribute?" They helped us develop a formula. This percent goes here. That percent goes there. Logistically setting up the donations was a challenge after the earthquake.

**Thomas:** I bet. How do you do a wire transfer when the electricity is out?

**Schuller:** That is the question. And three months after, I spent a week on a motorcycle looking for the women in the film.

**Thomas:** For us, one hundred percent of the proceeds go back to the community through the Rastafari Coral Gardens Committee. Generally, this has been fine but there are other bodies of Rastafari who are affiliated with them but not necessarily identical to them who had other agendas. There has been so much exploitation of images and representations of Rastafari, and so many films that have been done in the past where people have been promised things that they haven't been given. So one of the other organizations, the Millennium Council, which is an organization of all the different mansions of Rastafari, has been working on intellectual copyright protection to try to do something about this. They decided to take us on as a test case, basically. We made agreements with them through our co-producer Junior Manning, who at the time was both the chairperson of the Coral Gardens Committee and the Millennium Council. But after

he passed, we had to renegotiate and talk again with the new leaders of the Millennium Council and help them to understand what the original agreements were because they weren't necessarily there at the beginning of all of this. We had to remind everyone that we were not a big Hollywood entity and this was really an educational project. I'm a professor. John's a professor. Junior's a musician. We don't have resources like that. But, of course, we are happy to help in any way we can in terms of the reparations endeavors. The film is being distributed by Third World Newsreel and the institutional purchases are what really bring the money into the community. But still, the bigger impact is the awareness that it is helping to generate.

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**Schuller:** We have our work cut out for us to get people to think about how global systems are operating and how they're connected to other people through these systems. How do you get people to that point? I'm not sure a film could do it, but what it can do is start the conversation and it can ask questions that an audience has to answer. That's why it's important to also have the teaching tools, the website, the list of groups, the action alerts. People also need to come up with the right questions. In this case, they have to do with what it means to go to the Gap or to J.C. Penney's and pay fifty dollars for jeans? Who is making those jeans? How much do you think people in Haiti earn? People are surprised to know that the total Haitian labor costs were half of a quarter.

**Thomas:** Yes, right. Would you make another film?

**Schuller:** I'm not going to say no, but I'm not looking for the next project just now. However, I would say that my making this film made me a better ethnographer. It made me think more about narrative, story, and visuality than one would ordinarily do in academic work. My sensibilities as an ethnographer changed also because with the film, I had fifty minutes to get an idea across, not twenty five pages. Now I'm trying to write in a way that mirrors my mediations as a filmmaker. If you look at my dissertation and the book, I think it's clear my writing reflects this experience.

**Thomas:** People often ask if I'm going to make another, and like you, I'd never say never, but this one came about so organically. My own background is as a professional dancer, so I have a kind of need for a creative outlet, for a more visual and performative way of telling stories. Being a dancer is what got me into anthropology in the first place, using a research-to-performance methodology. So in some ways I feel like



doing the film has taken me back to that world, those kinds of public conversation, and that has been very gratifying.

**Schuller:** Yes, it raises other questions about what we're doing as anthropologists. Why are we doing it? Who is our collective audience? The an-

**The anthropological imagination should be more than amassing an encyclopedia of culture. It should be about asking questions about what connects us and what our specific challenges are locally and how they intersect.**

thropological imagination should be more than amassing an encyclopedia of culture. It should be about asking questions about what connects us and what our specific challenges are locally and how they intersect. Film is a really interesting tool to get us thinking about what we're contributing. Anthropology is coming through this long identity crisis. One solution that people seem to be jumping at is this still fuzzy "public anthropology." We need to figure out, take a step back, and really consider who are our publics and how do we reach them? Film is one tool of many at this point. 🌐