

# History in the Making

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# Travels Through History

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## **This is Jamaica**

By Margarita Navarette

Coming from a small town in San Bernardino County, California, most of my teachers advised me to study abroad and gain a world perspective when I attended university as it may be one of the only opportunities that would come my way. Not witnessing the world's beauty and to remain in the same town all my life, scared me. At the end of my second year, I felt stuck and like my window of opportunity closing on me. I felt like one of my mother's birds; trapped in a cage, dependent and unable to take care of myself. Often, I question my dependency on my parents, the difficulty for my parents and the struggles I would face if I did not live in the cage they built me.

During this time in my life, a string of accidents happened that left me with a totaled truck which resulted in an influx of cash. This lump sum of cash made my dreams of studying abroad finally become a reality. This trip offered me a chance to catch up on the necessary graduation requirements I needed to complete for my double major.

Upon visiting the study abroad office, my two main objectives were to take two general requirement courses and choose the cheapest program, and Jamaica was on the top of the list. I decided to do a little research on Jamaica, in order to keep my expectations low. To not create an idealistic version of the island based on Google Images, where the waters glistened, and tourists tanned sitting by the beach or laying poolside, only for

reality to hit the minute I set my eyes on the land and to be stuck there for the duration of the trip. This unappealing scenario kept running through my mind. I did not want my experience to be tainted by the gaze supported in advertisements and other social media websites. All things considered, I decided to take the essentials and go in with few preconceived notions. I prepared for the weather, mosquitoes—although later I found out not enough—and some of the day outings.

The first thing I noticed from the airplane window was the beautiful greenery from all the local flora on the island. Dark green rolling hills getting larger and multiplying brought me so much excitement I could barely contain myself in my seat. I wanted to scream and dance for joy. I was in Jamaica, the beautiful green island of Jamaica. I was overjoyed because it was the first time I had seen anything like this. Being a California native, I have for the most part only been exposed to nothing but barren land with dry brown grass and shrubs. The only time Southern California has greenery is when it rains two weeks out of the year. Seeing the abundance of life and the different hues of green on the island filled my heart with joy, so much it felt as if it would explode. The immense trees and bush along with the crystal clear ocean surrounding Jamaica was something I have only seen in movies. Pictures and video recordings do not do it justice. There is no camera that perfectly captures the natural setting of the island. I felt as if I found a missing piece of my life.

Trelawny is the parish the study abroad program is located in for the majority of the trip, near the main city of Falmouth. In the town square, the locals sell everything from clothes to produce on small wooden stands at the weekly markets. The town of Falmouth had one of the busiest ports during the transatlantic slave trade, with almost one hundred active sugar and rum plantations. Most of these plantations were destroyed and burned to the ground, only leaving the “kind” and most ruthless slave master plantations untouched. The city had running water before New York City, this was in part by the wealthy merchants and businesses in the area contributing to the community. The masons, carpenters, tavern-

keepers, and mariners had bustling businesses in town, benefiting from the construction of plantations. Since the start of Jamaica's emancipation from the British Empire in the 1840s, the town did not experience much economic and infrastructural advancement. The interactions I had with Jamaican people were for the most part very positive. I was welcomed and had meaningful conversations with the people I met, and I walked away appreciative of the human interaction. I was a part of a community, a familiar sentiment usually experienced around family and those close but not strangers. A few women I met walking down the street would offer to put aloe vera on the many mosquito bites I was sporting on my legs. Although it was incredibly sweet, I felt as though it was on the verge of becoming uncomfortably sweet.

An excerpt from *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* sparked in-class discussions of the Mammy who took care of the slave master's children better than she took care of her own, while in Jamaica, "Contemporaries thought slave women ... neglected their children and were cruel to them."<sup>1</sup> Further explaining, few female slaves gained the trust of their masters enough to attain responsibility around the household for additional benefits.<sup>2</sup> This leads readers of Thistlewood's journals to think slave women do not care for their own children, but will care for others' for a more selfish personal gain. By taking on household responsibilities, often lighter and less exhaustive work, the women saved themselves from the gruesome daily work under the blazing sun all other slaves endured. The house mothers, the wonderful women who cleaned and cooked for me and my villa mates, reminded me of the Mammy archetype. After conversing with them, we discovered that they did more than regular chores if the guests requested it. They went above and beyond cleaning and cooking, but usually people who stayed at the villas did not adequately tip

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (University of North Carolina Press 2004): 221.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

them for their services. I asked myself why would they do such admirable job if they were underpaid? A line from the book, *Freedom's Children: The 1983 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* by Colin A. Palmer, presented a plausible answer, “it is pride in a job well done... (55).”<sup>3</sup> The women and men working in the houses have too much pride in their work ethic to do an unacceptable job. I wondered if this was the reason they did their job superbly, or if they did not have any other option. The documentary *Life and Debt* discusses the difficulties Jamaica faced after gaining its independence from England in 1962. The main focus of the film is on the financial crisis they experienced after becoming a free country. The film also examines the horrible working conditions of its citizens and the agricultural deficit farmers encounter in the country.<sup>4</sup> Speaking with the locals about their jobs and their earnings, I learned the extent of the country’s unfair wages. I would like to think I am relatively in touch with current world news. In high school, my French teacher encouraged us to travel and be more aware of the world around us. From a freshman in high school to a junior in college, I have learned about the different events in other countries, and the exploitation of third world countries by other developed nations. Citizens are used as modern slaves, receiving meager pay and working in undesirable conditions. Slave labor is still in existence and people around the world unknowingly support the cruelty with products they purchase and companies they support.

Many foreign companies that have investments in Jamaica, whether it is a business or factory, abuse the minimal labor laws that protect employees. One person I met while in Jamaica works at a hotel as a pastry chef—considered to be a good job—who gets paid 375 Jamaican dollars an hour, the rough equivalent of three American dollars. However, he does not get paid for the overtime he works almost every day. He creates hundreds of small pastries

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<sup>3</sup> Colin A. Palmer, *Freedom's Children: The 1983 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014): 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Life and Debt*, directed by Stephanie Black, written by Jamacia Kincaid (New Yorker Films, 2001).

for five different buffets on the hotel property, and runs around constantly trying to keep up with the demand. This information combined with the information of knowing that most of the people on the island do not eat meat or vegetables—depending on their geographic location—on a regular basis because they cannot afford it, puts things into perspective. Many people living in Jamaica do not have enough funds to buy basic necessities, items that should not be considered luxury items. Meat in general is expensive and fresh vegetables were priced higher the deeper into the city you went. To save on buying produce, the Jamaican people eat from the fruit trees scattered all over the island. They, too, are a remnant of the transatlantic slave trade, imported from tropical climates to be planted on the land for the slaves to eat from while working. The country is used for its natural resources, but the foreign companies who have locations in Jamaica do not bother to properly compensate their employees for their hard work.

It is to no surprise that some people turn to the life of crime. On the island there is a high crime rate: scams, theft, stolen identity, etc. While talking to Buds, a bar owner at Fisherman's Beach—a beach outside the gated community the Jamaica program stays at—he explained the different ways in which you can be burglarized and ways to prevent it. The study abroad group worried about the ATMs in the surrounding area, the safety of the machines was discussed nearly every week when someone ran low on cash. The high crime rate is due to ATM fraud being one of the easiest ways a criminal can get fast cash. One can sit on a comfy chair of privilege, then judge and shame a person for participating in crime but the reality of their life must be taken into consideration. The poverty people live in, the daily financial struggle they face, is enough for people to act on inconceivable thoughts, thoughts only people who have “angry madness” can act upon.<sup>5</sup> There are other crimes that are worse than identity theft that happen on the island, such as rape and murder. Some not directly

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<sup>5</sup> Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (London: Overhead, 2016), 10.

related to money, some having no explanation at all but “every crime makes sense to someone.”<sup>6</sup> These words were repeated on the days the class discussed *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the book by Marlon James. Rape and murder are to most a brutal act only madmen can perform but, as the class discovered through the book’s character Bam-Bam, sometimes environment clouds judgement. The actions are not right or excusable, but they cannot be seen as black and white when the conditions they are placed in create a perfect storm of confusion and anger.

During the three short weeks I spent in Jamaica, I was surrounded by the island’s natural beauty and hospitable locals. The information I gained from the Jamaican people, the class readings, and class discussions are going to stay with me for the rest of my life. I left the island with a greater understanding of people in difficult situations and I will try to continue to understand people placed in difficult situations. The positive interactions I had will influence decisions I will make in my lifetime, continuing to study abroad, learning about different cultures, and making connections with people across the globe. This experience has greatly impacted my decision to live in as many countries as I possibly can. I need to continue to broaden my horizons and take advantage of the many opportunities life has to offer me.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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*Side of the highway near Kingston*



*Streets of Kingston*



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*Picture of a shortcut to the main road in Lilliput.*



*Travels through History*



*Various marketplaces in Kingston*

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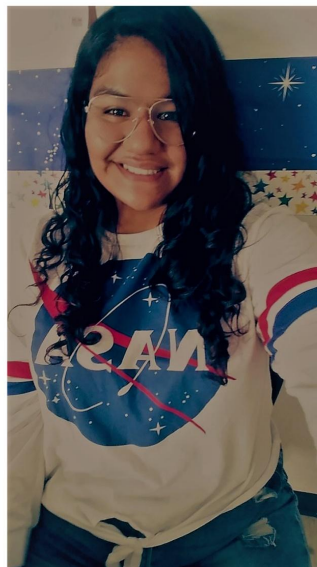
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**Author Bio**

Margarita Navarrete is currently an undergraduate student in Studio Art and Biology with an emphasis on ecology and evolution. Her interests include travel, global education, and how it ties in with art and religion. She works as a tutor for the Tutoring Center at CSUSB as well as two other organizations working with K-12 students. She hopes to teach science or art abroad for K-12 students after graduation, influencing a young generation of STEM students. She also hopes to accomplish her goal of opening her own art studio or gallery in a different country. After some time off school, she intends to pursue a Master's degree in Fine Arts and use the knowledge, experience, and influence gained throughout life to work her way into politics and make a difference in our communities.



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