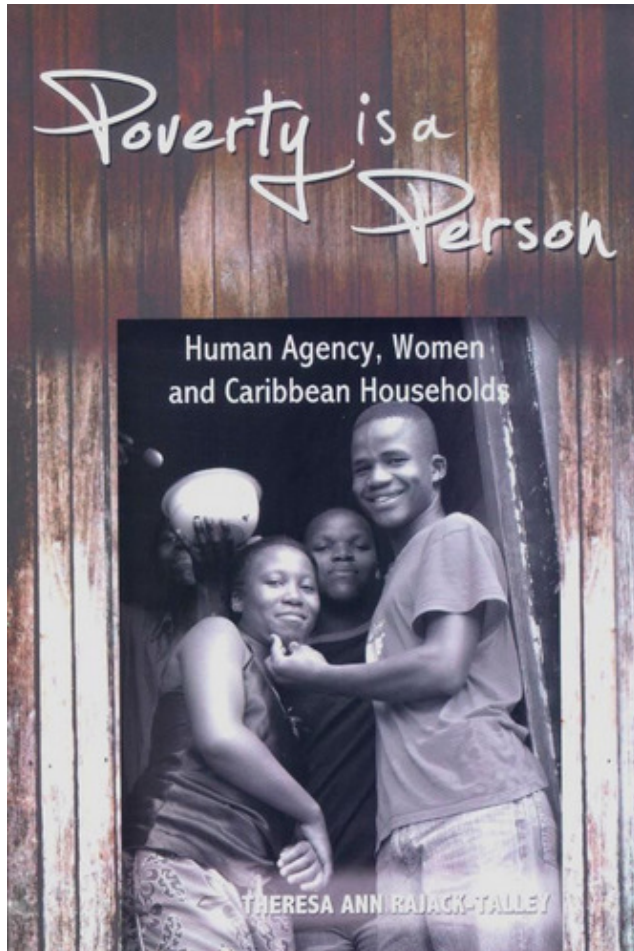


‘The other side of paradise’

Author explores widespread poverty in popular Caribbean destinations

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“Poverty is a Person: Human Agency, Women and Caribbean Households,” by Theresa Ann Rajack-Talley. Jamaica: Randle Publishers, 2016, 280 pages, \$22.95.



“Most travelers to the Caribbean enjoy the many beautiful sceneries, blue skies, white sand and emerald-colored seas,” Theresa Ann Rajack-Talley notes near the beginning of “Poverty is a Person: Human Agency, Women and Caribbean Households,” her comprehensive exploration of poverty in a region many know only as a vacation destination. “Some may even drive through the rustic neighborhoods that border the grand hotels.”

“They remain unaware that the picturesque Caribbean landscape is also scattered with a number of homeless people and food scavengers, including children. Domestic violence, child abuse, crime and violence, including gang activities and drug cartels, teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS are all on the rise. Many of these social ills are found within the growing length of unkempt, run-down, garbage-lined neighborhoods that have become part of both the rural and urban Caribbean scenery – the other side of paradise.”

As a tourist who has visited many of the locations Rajack-Talley mentions in this illuminating yet disheartening treatise on an issue that is obviously near and dear to her heart, I was disillusioned and somewhat disturbed to learn of the true condition of

this exquisite and inherently mysterious part of the world. Admittedly, I now have a better sense of why our tour guides were adamant we not venture too far from the beaten path when exploring our surroundings. I believe the most appropriate description of my reaction to her prose is best captured by the phrase “I had no idea.”

Structurally, “Poverty is a Person” consists of eight relatively detailed chapters, each devoted to a distinct yet ultimately interlocked and overarching theme. The book is extensively researched, with 24 pages of references that serve to strengthen and reinforce the detailed and persuasive assertions permeating the narrative.

It is obvious from the very first page the author personifies the quintessential scholar-practitioner approach in dissecting her chosen subject matter. On one hand, her writing has a decidedly academic feel. The ease with which she integrates relevant research on the topic of poverty and its inescapable relationship to gender is impressive. On the other hand, the way she infuses the story she is telling with

details about the everyday lives of the people behind the statistics animates the manuscript in a way that seems to elude most of those writing in the same general area. But it is Rajack-Talley's passion for the task at hand – and her genuine sense of empathy and connectedness for those she encountered while conducting her research – that distinguishes her work from those of many of her contemporaries.

As an example, consider the following passage from “The Socio-Psychological Pain of Poverty,” the third chapter and one I found particularly enlightening: “Interviews with Caribbean women reveal that the matriarch is real; women do admirably bear the burden of the family, especially during hard times. At the same time, this does not preclude women's vulnerability to abuse and physical and emotional pain. These two characteristics of women are not mutually exclusive, but are simply not widely reported. ... Consequently, interviews with women usually provide information that is congruent with the icon of the strong black matriarch. However, when this author probed from a humanistic angle, the façade of the matriarch cracked and women tearfully shared their pain.”

Rajack-Talley is the associate dean for international diversity and engagement programs in the College of Arts and Sciences and an associate professor and former chair of the Department of Pan African Studies at the University of Louisville. Her motivation for writing “Poverty is a Person” is fairly straightforward, as she notes in the Introduction: “The book reflects my own pedagogical standpoint of consistently linking research to teaching and community development. The information, discussions and analyses presented here are a reflection of these three areas and are, therefore, relevant to intellectuals engaged in research and education on human poverty and gender studies, as well as policymakers and practitioners in the field.”

A cogent appreciation for these multiple perspectives definitely helps the reader more accurately conceptualize her philosophical framework and therefore understand the proactive posture of the book on a much deeper level than would have otherwise been the case. What I found most inspiring about the book was the author's irrefutable optimism and unshakable conclusion that the dark and dire portrait she spent much of the first half of the book constructing can be altered and even possibly eradicated over the coming decades, provided evidence-based strategies are consistently and conscientiously employed within a contextual architecture that emphasizes moral imperatives.

“Researchers and policymakers who are interested in understanding human poverty and developing appropriate strategies should focus more on the lived experiences along with the income, expenditure and social indicators,” she explains in “Humanizing Poverty Research and Adopting Gender Approaches as We Move Forward,” the culminating chapter. “It is only by addressing all the dimensions of poverty, attacking it at all levels, and expanding analyses to include the cognitive, relational and gender aspects, that the payoffs to development and poverty reduction are likely to be the greatest, and where policy changes will make the most difference.”

If you are interested in the overwhelming impact poverty has on the world, and how it manifests itself in myriad ways that are reflected in gender roles and patterns of physical, psychological and emotional abuse and violence, then you should definitely add “Poverty is a Person” to your reading list. Rajack-Talley's groundbreaking treatise constitutes a call-to-arms for anyone concerned about making the planet a more hospitable – and equitable – place where everyone has access to the basic necessities of life and everyone is afforded the opportunity to experience basic human dignity. So goes the Caribbean, so goes the world.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

– Editor's note: The author will speak in WKU Libraries' Far Away Places series at 7 p.m. Thursday at Barnes & Noble Booksellers on Campbell Lane.