

Dead Woman Pickney: A Memoir of Childhood in Jamaica. Yvonne Shorter Brown (2010). Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. 210 pages. ISBN 978-1-55458-189-4.

Dead Woman Pickney is a story of transition from child to adult; girl to woman within the social, political, educational and economic framework of Jamaica as the country moved its way to independence from Britain. Yvonne Shorter Brown confronts the painful memories of childhood as she writes her life history and delves into the society into which she was born. The book series within which this text appears has done a good job to provide an intellectual space for “those who may never have imagined themselves as writers or as people with lives worthy of being (re) told” (series description)

Dead Woman Pickney is organized around a prologue, five chapters and an epilogue. In the prologue we get a glimpse of what drove Brown to research and write as she lays out the sexualized history of racism and slavery in Jamaica, and beyond, in an attempt to “heal the scars of willful ignorance and epistemic violence that silence the history of enslavement in this the so-called New World” (p.2). Her justification is educational; she recognizes how tension can occur between students and teachers when hegemonic knowledge of the colonized other clashes with the repressed knowledge of the colonized. It is a tension that I can certainly attest to through my own research on African Canadian youth in Alberta schools (*Under the Gaze: Learning to Black in White Society*). A number of my interviewees recalled several negative consequences from challenging the validity of their teachers’ knowledge claims about the experiences of peoples of African descent.

Chapter one “Early Childhood Memories” lays the framework for the overall text and gives us good insights into growing up as a young child without a mother. It is an initial early life of relative stability in relation to Brown’s later struggles and experiences. An astute observer of behavior the young Brown demonstrates clearly how a child has to obey the whim of a biological father rather than her adopted Aunt Joyce who up until her father’s claim on her had played the role of surrogate mother when her own mother died. The discussion of the relationship between Aunt Joyce and her father reveals a set of interactions tainted through gender, class and race as are most gender relations discussed in the book. In this chapter we get a good sense of rural Jamaica and how making roads or working in the cane fields was hot and arduous labour. We see that a child is vulnerable and unable to affect how her life spans out; she has to consistently succumb to adult authority.

Brown’s chapter two “Louisiana Blues, circa 1950-54”, continues to unfold her life with her father and newfound brother and sister. It is a rural life full of activities from catching birds to eating corn and sugar cane. Here we find Yvonne bonding with her brother and sister as they try to outwit their father and his rages. Characters that come in and out of Brown’s life are put to work to illustrate broader themes. So the character Bernice is used to bridge and illustrate cultural experiences, (songs, dances, consumer goods) between the rural (Louisiana, Jamaica) and urban (Kingston). Or Virgil Bullock, Principal of Mango Walk All-Age school who demonstrates the traditional perspective on school discipline and childrearing, and who for Brown was “someone who made your knees knock as you trembled with fear” (p.59)—a disciplinarian.

Chapter three “Life and Schooling in May Pen” and four “Clarendon College, Chapelton, January 1960-July 1961” emphasize the educational system as an important institution in shaping identity as well as offering “a worthwhile life through education” (p.89). Education in colonial times was still one that reinforced deference to the British Queen, country and authority. Curricula reinforced similar values with many of the students being educated for domestic or laboring jobs. Throughout these chapters Brown gives a good overview of the different stages of education and how education becomes classed and dependent upon socio-economic status. Education is both a source of enablement and constraint. It is a source of social mobility yet this mobility often rests on someone else identifying your merit and talent. Useful too, is how education during the early 1960s is explored within a broader geopolitical realm where the West Indies Federation and pan-Africanism contest existing colonial understandings. These changes are not just at the national and international level. Brown brings to light, through several vignettes, how women’s lives were affected by the coming of household labour saving devices during the late 1950s and early 1960s as well as how these commodities become a part of classed relations with lower status “helpers”. Browns’ early departure from high school to work in a bank also provides rich opportunity to examine in detail how a gendered and racial hierarchy is enabled through patronage.

For me one of the most important discussions in the final chapter “Becoming a Teacher: Mico College, 1962-65”. Brown’s detailed account of life at Mico is insightful both in terms of gender relations and curriculum. I appreciated the in-depth description of curriculum that demonstrates how teachers trained at Mico underwent similar foundational studies to counterparts here in Canada. Viewing the rigour of teacher education in Jamaica might explain why some immigrants who came to fill a teacher shortage Alberta in the early 1960s were surprised to find that their credentials and experiences were not recognized. Adding Yvonne’s account to my own recent interviews with Mico teachers I have garnered a better insight into what student life was like for some of my interviewees who were her “batch mates”. Brown’s student days at Mico offer her a sense of independence and identity in what at times seems more akin to a British public school rather than a teacher education college.

Reading the book brought back my own early memories of growing up in Jamaica during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Brown has a sharp sense of what some sociologists might identify as the ability to link individual troubles to public issues. Her recording of the intersections of race, gender, class and colour provides an easy entry into discussions of how colonialism comes to shape our everyday relations so that we consistently reproduce dominant relations through our everyday interactions. The text is a wonderful example of Henri Lefebvre’s insightful argument that the micro of everyday life cannot be divorced from the macro. So for example, individual violence within the family can be viewed as a consequence of patriarchy entrenched in broader colonial society and intertwined with colourism. At times, what comes to mind is Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eyes* with its vivid recollection of a young life marred through colourism. The harrowing violence of everyday life becomes apparent through Brown’s narratives yet we also see hope for our ability to change abusive practices. I found her disclosure of how she sought help to interrupt the way she was parenting her own children a sign of hope for those working towards breaking a circle of family violence reinforced through parenting. In reflecting on a negative relationship and

estrangement from her early caregiver Aunt Joyce, Brown is able to come to some peace through a deeper understanding of how our identities are constituted through existing social conditions and broader societal concerns

While a wonderful read, I feel that the experiences of the reader could have been enhanced through a time line that made it easier to link the various periods and characters. She also leaves out certain aspects of her life and I wondered what was life like in Canada? What about meeting her husband and her ability to form relationships?

Brown's recollections made me realize how much of the social language of Jamaica runs through me even though I left long ago and I am now more of a child of the diaspora. *Dead Woman Pickney* recalls children groomed to be citizens and workers of the United Kingdom and Colonies in a time of movement from patronage through to supposed merit. Brown's question of what is a mother is a haunting one and the idea of a motherless child evoked memories of slavery and the many children who, separated from mothers (and fathers), had no one to protect them from the ills of life.

The book would be useful in getting students to understand how race, gender, and class are structured through colonialism and how these social categories do not operate alone but are put to work in a coherent way to maintain relations of domination.

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References

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