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Yvonne Shorter Brown. *Dead Woman Pickney: A Memoir of Childhood in Jamaica.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. viii + 198 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55458-189-4.

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A Narrative of Colonial Jamaica, 1947 -1962

Yvonne Shorter Brown's *Dead Woman Pickney* is a historical narrative of Jamaica's transition from a British colony to an independent nation in 1962. Shorter Brown lucidly reconstructs the history of life in colonial Jamaica from the perspective of the subaltern. She tells the everyday life stories of the ordinary black, white, brown-skinned, and Chinese Jamaicans living under British Crown Colony administration. Shorter Brown pulls the reader into her childhood and adolescent worlds, where she yearns for her dead mother; there are many unanswered questions about whom her mother was and why she knew so little about her. This is the hallmark of *Dead Woman Pickney*: it fuses the memory of the author's childhood with the wider cultural and institutional trauma associated with imperialism. Students of British colonial history, social theorists, readers of Caribbean literature, and scholars of the Atlantic and Jamaica will find much value in Shorter Brown's book. It is written with passion, humor, and an intensity that readers will find both intriguing and entertaining.

The book has a prologue, five chapters and an epilogue. The chapters follow in chronological order, beginning in 1947 with Brown's early childhood memories and ending in 1965, when she became a trained teacher from Mico College. Founded in 1835, The Mico University College (as it is has been known since 2003) claims bragging rights as the oldest teacher training institution in the Western Hemisphere and the English-speaking Caribbean's oldest institution of higher education. It began as a co-educational institute coinciding with the gradual elimination of slavery in the colonies and the efforts of abolitionists like Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. The charge was for educating and the empowering former enslaved blacks in the colonies. In the first two chapters of *Dead Woman Pickney* the author addresses the central position of the sugar plantation to the economic structure of colonies in the British West Indies. On her daily walks to school in Carron Hall, a rural peasant community in the parish of St. Mary, Shorter Brown notices other communities on the outskirts of old sugar plantations. The setting up of small villages in close proximity to sugar plantations after emancipation was a common practice among formerly enslaved Africans. The plantations were used as a source of income for the newly freed Africans as they tried to survive in the post-slavery era.

As she lays out in the first couple of chapters, sugar cane production was pivotal to the social and economic structure of the British Empire in the Caribbean. During crop time, when the sugar cane plant was ready for harvesting, children could be seen in the fields working alongside their parents. As the author notes, "such was the scene during crop time–country children walking through cane pieces to school, their lives dominated by the cycles of sugar cane planting, weeding, fertilizing, cutting, loading and transporting to the sugar mills" (p. 52). By linking her memory of the sugar plantation economic cycles to secondary sources on the topic, the author adds scholarly rigor to her narrative. Indeed, throughout the text the author refers to scholarly works to explain and put in context the things she observed as a child in colonial rural Jamaica. The works of Caribbean historians, such as Barry Higman's *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica 1807-1834* (1995); Richard Dunn's *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (2000); and Phillip Curtin's *Two Jamaicas: The Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony 1830-1865* (1968), are cited by Shorter Brown as she describes the labor conditions in her community during the 1940s and 1950s. This approach by the author blends literary production with scholarship on sugar, slavery, and racial and ethnic relations under colonialism. *Dead Woman Pickney* fundamentally explores British Caribbean history from below: Shorter Brown gives the descendants of the enslaved Africans agency and a voice. While

this work incorporates an economic historical account of colonial Jamaica, it is also an example of cultural history.

By reflecting on her own haunting past of growing up without her mother, the author addresses the broader issue of adaptation to the conditions of a colonial society by the descendants of enslaved Africans. Shorter Brown decries the colonial condition as she walks the reader through the experiences of poverty, poor public health, and a derelict educational system that the black majority encountered in rural Jamaica. Children easily became the victims of tropical maladies such as chiggers and yaws. Many children, as Shorter Brown recounts, did not wear shoes to school, which facilitated the spread of these diseases. As the author notes, sanitary conditions at schools were deplorable and reflected the neglect of the colonial administration. In fact, Shorter Brown's critique falls in line with the report of the Moyne Commission of 1938-39 that described the social and economic conditions in the British Caribbean colonies as in urgent need of reform and improvement. The author shows her readers what it was like to be in an overpopulated classroom, sitting on wooden benches, with children who had head lice running up and down their backs, and bathroom facilities that were unsanitary pit latrines. The educational curriculum was colonial in content, with children being encouraged to become semi-skilled laborers in agriculture. Shorter Brown remembers doing gardening at school. Her narrative fits into the literature on British colonialism that has identified the post-slavery dogma, which decreed that the newly freed population should remain as sources of labor for the agricultural purposes of the British Empire.

At the center of this work is the author's yearning to learn more about her dead mother and about other family members. She is a dead woman "pickney," (the Jamaican word for child), who is left behind in a society that is at odds with its own sense of racial identity and belonging. The reader learns about a child and a young adult who struggles to develop a loving relationship with her father and his sister, Aunt Joyce. Through her childhood experiences with her guardian Aunt Joyce and around the wider community she lived in, Shorter Brown vividly explains how racial discrimination affected all aspects of social and economic life in colonial Jamaica.

The author was the product of a mixed marriage between a black-skinned mother and a brown-skinned father. She is unable to find much information on her mother not only because she is dead, but also because she was a black Jamaican who had married into a family of white ancestry. Shorter Brown reflects on her existence within the colonial context of Jamaica to raise broader questions about the sexual contact and interaction during and after plantation slavery that created creole societies. Seemingly contradictory hybrid cultures of opposing Afrocentrism and hegemonic Eurocentrism have shaped these creolized Caribbean societies, a peculiar fusion that has produced an equally distinctive social stratification based on race and color. To be brown-skinned in Jamaica during the colonial and postcolonial periods signified the interracial mixing between descendants of the former enslaved Africans and the white Europeans who settled in the island. Here Shorter Brown's cultural-historical account illustrates the importance of color and race to social life in the British Empire. Similar accounts of race and color can be found in the historiography of other parts of the British Commonwealth, such as India.

Plantation slavery in the British Caribbean created creole societies ripped apart by the socially constructed categories of race, color, and class. Her observation of the domestic violence that characterized her aunt's marriage captures the bigger picture of race and class relations in colonial Jamaica. She says that her aunt, a white woman, and her uncle, a colored man, "were locked in the deadly embrace of race, class, and gender inequality. They lived out the curse of a racialized superiority-inferiority binary" (p. 16). This was the story of post-slavery societies and Shorter Brown provides a close look at the Jamaican context in its transition from British Crown colony to independent nation. Sadly, postcolonial societies are still gripped by this tragedy of racialized disunity. The powerful psychological legacies of slavery continue to afflict these societies in ways that are similar to Shorter Brown's descriptions of colonial Jamaica.

This is an easy book to follow. The author writes with a self-reflective style that invites the reader inside her deep emotional spaces. It reads more like a novel than a historical manuscript. However, it addresses some important historical moments in Jamaica's colonial history. The time period covered in *Dead Woman Pickney* was a highly charged period of political decolonization when the black majority got the right to vote and local political leaders were emerging as the founding fathers of the Jamaican nation. Limited attention is paid to these important developments by the author. This may be a result of the geographic focus, as most of these political developments were centered in the urban areas of the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew. This weakness of the text is at the same time a source of strength. Shorter Brown's focus on the parishes of Clarendon and St. Mary informs the reader of life in the rural sections of the island dur-

ing the period of decolonization. This is an important addition to the literature on Jamaica's political transition from British colonialism to independence.

Dead Woman Pickney is a story about race, class, and color relations in colonial Jamaica between 1947 and 1965. The author's life journey is a metaphor for the broader struggles and challenges that black and brown-skinned Jamaicans had to endure as they tried to incorporate themselves in a society structured by the economic and social institutions of British imperialism. Shorter Brown shows that educational attainment was a path taken by the descendants of enslaved Africans in Jamaica to overcome the barriers of racial, gender, class, and color inequality. This is a good read for those interested in the phenomena of racial, color, and ethnic formations in the creolized post-slavery societies of the Anglo-Caribbean. It has significance to the Atlantic world history of slavery, sugar, and colonialism. Even though this is a narrative account of the author's personal life journey from childhood to adulthood, it gives a firsthand account of the social and economic relations among the subjects of British Empire in the Caribbean context.

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