Class Interruptions: Inequality and Division in African Diasporic Women's Fiction by Robin Brooks (review)

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Book Review

Class Interruptions: Inequality and Division in African Diasporic Women's Fiction. Robin Brooks. U of North Carolina P, 2022. 238 pages. $95.00 hardback; $32.50 paper.

In *Class Interruptions: Inequality and Division in African Diasporic Women's Fiction,* Robin Brooks offers a compelling study of how contemporary African American and Caribbean women novelists illuminate the relational, material, and structural features of class within Black life. Through close readings that privilege imaginative practices of literary production as forms of socioeconomic and political inquiry, Brooks argues that the writers under discussion "advocate for a reassessment of economic, social, and political practices within U.S. and Caribbean societies while leading readers to greater class consciousness" (2). Her work reveals how Black literary culture offers an analysis and critique of the impact of racial capitalism and neoliberalism on Black diasporic life, equal to sociological and economic analysis in charting how class disparities in housing, education, exposure to violence, and quality of life are felt, negotiated, and contested.

Brooks develops these insights about class as depicted within Black literary culture through her original formulation of the "cross-class relationship trope," which structures the book and is useful to those in Black studies and literary studies invested in examining class in literature or cultural production. As a comparative mode of analysis, the cross-class relationship trope highlights both shared conditions and structural dissonances across the Black diaspora while exposing the enduring challenges that undermine the social mobility and quality of life of the Black working class. It foregrounds how class tensions, especially intraracial ones, shape Black life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this way, the trope attends to the long arc of transatlantic slavery and its afterlives in the systems of racial capitalism, neoliberal policies, and US imperialism even as it illuminates the more immediate dynamics of mobility and inequality in the post-civil-rights United States and post-independence Caribbean.

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Brooks's grounded readings bring well-known and under-discussed works into conversation, as she examines class relationships and their historical and cultural contingencies in novels by Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Dawn Turner in the United States, and Olive Senior, Merle Hodge, Diana McCaulay, and Oonya Kempadoo in the Caribbean. In her readings, the literary production of these Black women writers is not simply a mirror of class but a mode of analysis, revealing how class is lived and gains meaning in kitchens, neighborhoods, and intimate relationships rather than solely in terms of waged labor or in the workplace. This approach aligns with a broader tradition in Black women's writing, which treats literary production itself as a critical practice of socioeconomic thought, theorizing class from the inside out or from Black experience (often working-class) to larger socioeconomic systems.

Equally significant in *Class Interruptions* is how Brooks extends Black feminist concepts of intersectionality by showing how class reframes race, gender, and sexuality within relational domains of community, kinship, romantic intimacy, and friendship. Class then becomes not just a category within intersectionality but a structuring terrain that renders the entanglement of race, gender, and sexuality newly legible. As she persuasively explains, "Although intersectionality can account for the confluence of class, gender, race, sexuality, and nationality, *Class Interruptions* usefully emphasizes class in order to understand its multidimensionality" (13). At the same time, the explanation remains brief, confined primarily to the introduction. It is a potentially generative point that might prompt Black feminist scholars to consider how the "multidimensionality" of class can expand or reframe intersectionality itself. Brooks gestures to this possibility but does not fully explicate it even as her chapters consistently present what the multidimensionality of class looks like.

Each chapter of *Class Interruptions* demonstrates the cross-class relationship trope in action. Chapter 1 examines Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and Dawn Turner's *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven* (1996), showing how neighborhood spaces and friendships across class lines debunk myths of mobility and reveal both the fragility and potential of intraracial connection. Chapter 2 turns to Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003), where Brooks shows how the afterlife of the libidinal economy of slavery undergirds contemporary sexual politics, rendering Black girls expendable and adultifying Black boys in deference to capitalist desires. Her empathetic yet assertive framing of working-class eighteen-year-old Junior Viviane as a female aggressor draws attention to the need for gender-neutral protections against sexual violence. And because Heed— a working-class Black girl sexually abused and married off at eleven years old—is vilified alongside Junior in the narrative, as Brooks observes, the chapter further reveals how working-class Black girls are condemned whether victim or perpetrator.

Shifting to the Caribbean, chapter 3 analyzes Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970) and Olive Senior's *Dancing Lessons* (2011), showing how education operates as a mechanism of neoliberal regulation. In both novels, working-class characters are constrained either by the ideology that educational attainment alone can overcome structural inequality or by the illusion of equitable access to education. Brooks's close reading of the elderly working-class Mrs. Samphire in *Dancing Lessons* is especially compelling. A newcomer to a retirement home paid for by her middle-class daughter, she is immediately asked about her schooling, exposing a worldview in which "educational attainment functions as a proxy for moral and social value, a belief neoliberalism exploits to privatize responsibility for structural inequity" (92). Brooks makes clear here, as she does throughout the book, how ideologies of neoliberalism are internalized and reproduce divisions socially beyond economic policy. Chapter 4 focuses on Diana McCaulay's *Dog-Heart* (2010), where a cross-class bond between a middle-class woman and a working-class boy exposes human rights violations tied to the erosion of social safety nets in Jamaica. The epilogue of *Class Interruptions* situates cross-class romance in Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) and Oonya Kempadoo's *Tide Running* (2001) to show how intimacy and sex tourism become sites for critiquing US imperialism and the persistent subjugation of the Black working class.

Throughout *Class Interruptions,* Brooks lucidly conveys how neoliberalism and racial capitalism shape Black class divides. The book ultimately calls for deeper intraracial class consciousness and invites readers to see Black class not as a monolith but as a dynamic site of tension and possibility—one that literature helps us to apprehend and, perhaps, to reconcile.

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