

# **Brooks, R. (2022) *Class Interruptions: Inequality and Division in African Diasporic Women's Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press.**

**Review by Scott Henkel**

Intersectionality—as a method, a perspective, an activist strategy—is among the most important advances in humanistic and social scientific research in the past few decades. The idea that human experiences, histories, oppressions, and liberations intersect and share characteristics in common, while still retaining uniqueness and diversity, is as powerful politically as it is useful intellectually.

The concept's history has been told elsewhere: Kimberlé Crenshaw gave intersectionality a name in 1989. Thinkers like Angela Davis were writing intersectional analyses in books like *Women, Race, and Class* well before the method had that name. Its future, I hope, looks like Robin Brooks' new book *Class Interruptions: Inequality and Division in African Diasporic Women's Fiction*.

To my mind, one of the key values of such an analysis is that it attempts to show a fuller picture of human experience than an examination of a single facet of what that experience can do. Of course, focusing on any single variable can produce insight, too, because what looks like a single variable—say, class, race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, geographical location—often shows that what looked singular at first turns out quite multifaceted.

Nevertheless, the insights that intersectionality has given us might banish, for the good, baseline assumptions that even monograph-length works need focus narrowly on one aspect of human existence, even perhaps with a quick comment, strategically placed, that nods to knowing that people cannot be summed up by any single characteristic. If the question from some years ago was: how can a book on both race and class and gender cohere? then the question now ought to be: how can a book that ignores these intersections adequately represent human complexity and the overlapping barriers to our liberation?

In *Class Interruptions*, Brooks boldly and ambitiously shows how, in her words, 'contemporary African American and Caribbean women writers advocate for a reassessment of economic, social, and political practices within U.S. and Caribbean societies while leading readers to greater class consciousness' (p. 2). This is no small task, and the many fine details in the book prove that it is exemplary intersectional analysis. As Brooks also writes, the book 'is an examination of the pendulum swings between setbacks and progress, failed hopes and aspirations in this era' (p. 2).

A book with such an ambitious scope must find a throughline to make the argument cohere, and Brook's focus in this regard is to select fiction that includes what Brooks calls the 'cross-class relationship trope,' a literary technique that pairs characters from different class backgrounds in order to show how that relationship dynamic critiques systemic inequalities. In Part I of the book,

Brooks writes two chapters about African-American novels (Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Dawn Turner's *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven*, and Toni Morrison's *Love*). In Part II, Brooks writes two chapters about Anglophone Caribbean novels (Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, Olive Senior's *Dancing Lessons*, and Diana McCaulay's *Dog-Heart*). Brooks uses that trope to analyze those relationships and a range of problems: unequal access to healthcare and housing, sexual power dynamics, the ends of education, the tension between human rights law and its lack of enforcement, and more. Each of these inequalities, of course, has its own specific characteristics, but Brooks weaves elements of each together with examples of how the novel's characters deal with those inequalities, successfully or not. One thread she pulls through each analysis is 'the importance of coalition-building and alliance building; [...] relationships,' Brooks writes, 'represent the beginning of or foundation of the solutions to address these matters. The reality of imperfect alliances should not be deterrents, as fractures can lead to further insight' (148).

While firmly grounded in literary analysis, Brooks also weaves social scientific research into the book's analysis. As a field, working-class studies is admirably interdisciplinary, but nevertheless, in any particular work, one tends to find either Sherry Linkon or Bordieu in the citations; Brooks deftly builds upon both, and many more thinkers in the field, to make the book's case. Brooks draws on a wide-ranging scholarly archive—the book's introduction charts what she calls 'the long contemporary,' including major theorists of Africana Studies, the Black Arts Movement, and the Caribbean Artists Movement, and also surveys the scholarship on working-class studies of recent decades. Brooks combines this archive with time spent in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Bahamas conducting field research (27-28). The combination of methods makes the interdisciplinary approach in the book particularly strong.

The author of several articles, *Class Interruptions* is Brooks' first book. I hope it is the first of many, because this book has vision, ambition, and insight. Again, Brooks' central concern is the cross-class relationship, which of course receives consistent attention, but I also look forward to reading more of her work because there are tantalizing ideas in *Class Interruptions* that receive prominent mention, but could benefit from full-length studies of their own.

For example, Brooks drops mention of the need for a strong welfare state several times. That fascinates me, given the book's central concern. It surfaces on p. 99, where, wonderfully, it joins with a conversation about gardening and becomes a symbol of a much larger project of cultivating a just community. From that point, Brooks raises the question of an adequate welfare state, capable of facilitating and supporting human dignity, approximately a dozen more times, dwelling on it the longest in Chapter Four, 'Human Rights and Wrongs: Violations to a Decent Standard of Living in Diana McCaulay's *Dog-Heart*'. This question, it seems to me, is one that an author who mixes literary and social scientific methods is well-prepared to answer: a writer who studies fiction has tools to think about what could be, but is not yet, and a writer who studies material conditions has tools to study what currently is, and how it could be changed. These are the opportunities intersectional and interdisciplinary methods provide.

While clear-eyed about the injustices and inequalities of the 20th and early 21st centuries in the United States and the Caribbean, Brooks looks forward to a better world. As she writes, the cross-class relationship trope in the fiction under consideration:

advocates for people to see themselves and others in different ways and to imagine new ways of thinking to help generate solutions to inequalities. A part of changing the narrative and wider culture around class involves increasing people's class consciousness and their awareness of their possible complicity in the skewed state of affairs. Mind shifts can lead to greater advocacy for structural changes. (p. 148)

The work of forging such alliances, as Brooks writes, is not easy, but *Class Interruptions* makes a powerful case for the mind shifts that can lead to them, by making an intersectional and interdisciplinary demonstration of why they are necessary.

### **Reviewer Bio**

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