



'From Jamaica to England Part 3: Primary sources and the autobiography of a 'Middle-Class Brown''

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Reading Race, Collecting Cultures

Collections at the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre



Posted on 24/01/2014

From Jamaica to England – Part 3: Primary sources and the autobiography of a 'Middle-Class Brown'



The Roving Reader Files

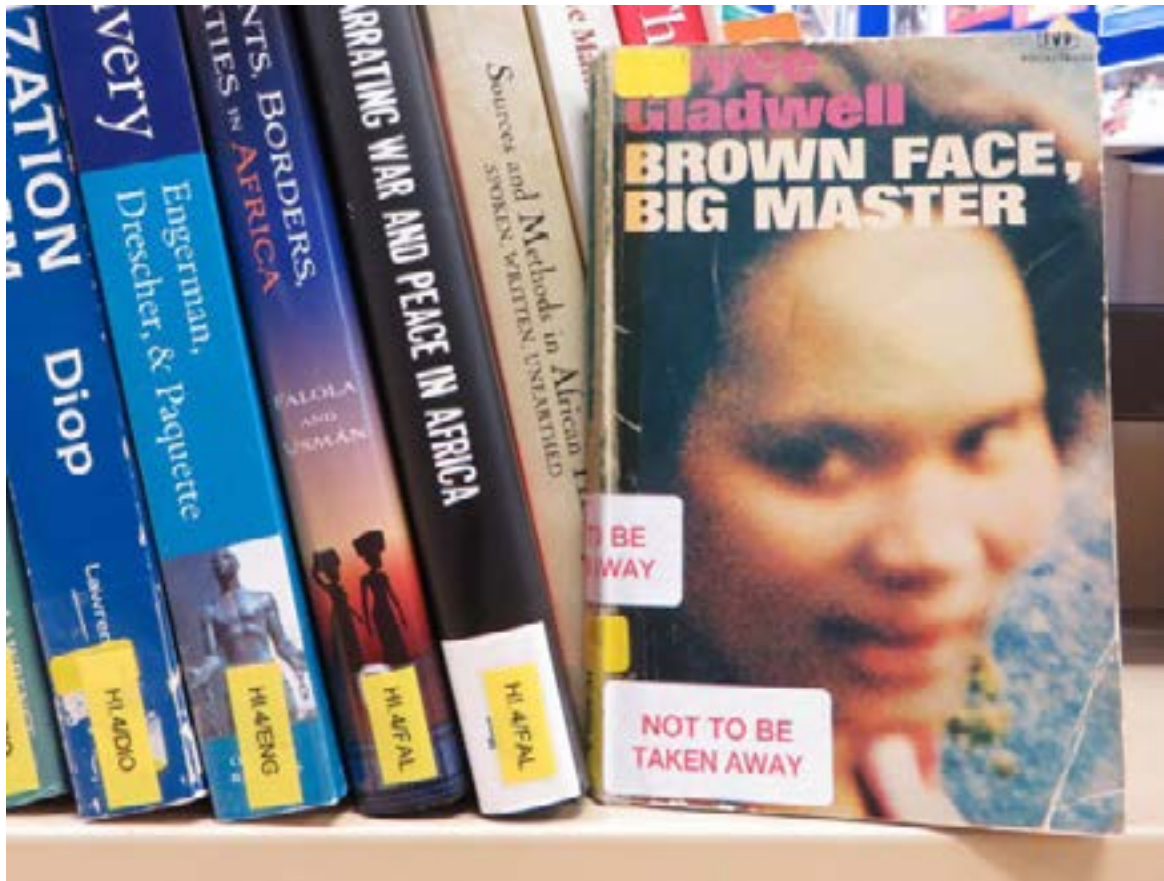
The third instalment in our Roving Reader's journey from Jamaica to England, through the primary and secondary sources in our library collection.

Joyce Gladwell Goes to London

Una Marson, through our secondary source, has given our Jamaica-to-England trip some context. Hurray! Now we can get comfortable, kick off our shoes, and learn a thing or two from the reminiscences of our companions. We're going to thumb through some primary sources.

Primary sources come in many guises - letters, diaries, even old bus tickets, lists and catalogues. Archives are full of such things (often called manuscripts and ephemera), but for our journey, we're going to look at the published variety; **autobiographies** - **what people have written about themselves.**

This time, we'll look at Joyce Gladwell's *Brown Face, Big Master* (published 1969), which represents for us the perspective of a 'middle-class Brown' intellectual. Joyce's experiences tell us much about the colour distinctions in Jamaica and England, as well as illustrate the loneliness and dislocation that could be the result of migration. These are key themes, because they get to the heart of what it meant to be a Jamaican migrant, settling overseas.



For Jamaicans, the fine distinctions between shades of black, brown and white have been all-important. Una Marson and Joyce were both educated alongside privileged Whites, as scholarship girls in elite English-curriculum schools, but Una spent her whole life compensating, with self-motivated exceptional performance, for being Black. Joyce counted herself fortunate to be 'Brown'.

In Joyce's childhood, images of her White grandparents took pride of place, whilst the Black forebears were quietly forgotten. Her Brown mother was delighted to have married a pale-skinned Black (an example of social mobility), and **the prestige of whiteness was imprinted on Joyce from a young age.** Her teachers and parents forbade her to mix with local Black girls or use Jamaican dialect, and though intellectually Joyce disagreed with her school encyclopaedia that "Mentally the negro is inferior to the White," the continual everyday reinforcing of the colour hierarchy left its psychological mark.

Joyce's social category had emerged, through racial mixing, as a distinct colonial class, performing skilled sophisticated tasks for which there were not enough Whites. Middle-class expectations encouraged Joyce to work towards migrating to London to attend university in 1953. Her background, however, didn't prepare her for what came next.

Joyce was a very successful student, and initially, university cocooned her from much of the reality of life in England. **Only on marrying her White English husband, did she come face-to-face with the full force of isolation and racism.**

Married life began in small dark apartments, where housework and cooking, demeaningly, fell to Joyce - back home these were the domain of servants. London was bone-numbingly cold, grey and damp, whilst the reserve of her English neighbours came across as unfriendly indifference. In Joyce's memory, Jamaica came to shimmer like a vivid paradise of balmy evenings and comradeship.

Already prone to depression, Joyce found her coping mechanisms broke down completely under the burden of motherhood. In Jamaica, she would have enjoyed the support of her extended family, but here there was only her husband.

Isolation and depression were compounded by racism. In Jamaica, Joyce was classed as Brown, but here in Britain she was just another Black, to be loathed by some locals as one of the immigrants that seemed

to be taking over the country. Professionals patronised her, whilst others were far less polite.

Joyce eloquently described numerous incidents, but perhaps the most revealing, for our purposes, was when she and her family were thrown out of accommodation, because her husband had not revealed she was Black.

For days, Joyce self-pityingly lamented over White racism, but **gradually it dawned on her, that she was herself no less racist than the landlady who had ejected her.** Hadn't she always given thanks for being Brown, ignoring and rejecting Black people in her own country? Didn't she and the landlady both suffer from the same defective upbringing, which judged people according to shades of colour, rather than anything more substantial?

This was a crucial lesson, and Joyce Gladwell faced her inadequacies with honesty. In doing so, she has given us greater insight into the dynamics involved in journeying from Jamaica to England.

In the next post, we'll dip into printed primary sources that give a different, but complementary, perspective.

Joyce Gladwell's *Brown Face, Big Master* was published in 1969 by Inter-Varsity Press, a Christian publishing house. Joyce charted her spiritual progress as a fundamental part of the narrative. This ensured the significance of her work in frankly revealing the psychological nuances associated with attitudes to race and colour in the Caribbean.