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Whiteness and the Contemporary Caribbean

Introduction

When we think of whiteness in the Caribbean, to what do we necessarily refer? What census and other enumeration statistics illustrate is that the countries of interest in this chapter – Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados – have a large African-descent presence; ethnicity is figured racially and by ancestral national origin; black and white are identified differently locally as African and Caucasian, for example; mixing is accounted for but Trinidad and Tobago pays more attention to the mix itself in terms of enumerating the African and Indian mix; and the white population is quite small in all three countries. The Jewish, Lebanese and Syrian absence from the Jamaican census makes one wonder if these groups have simply left the country or been subsumed under ‘white’, while in Trinidad and Tobago they are listed separately from ‘Caucasian’. Barbados has the largest white population but it never participated in Indian indentureship, so the black African-descent population dominance established during enslavement continues undisturbed (CARICOM Capacity Development Programme, 2009: 30).

In these countries where such a small percentage of the population is the elite, we could say that being part of the white elite, whether as nationals or outsiders, also means marginalization, unbelonging and illegitimacy within a culture that is predominantly black African descent and refers to Africa as the origin of its culture and traditions. To this extent, then, whiteness is an absent presence. This elite is non-black as in other Caribbean states, but white as a description for this
group is complicated by the inclusion of Jewish, Syrian, Lebanese, Portuguese and ‘mixed’ families. Whiteness is related to class, social standing and economic power, and these are as significant for racial categorization as skin colour, if not more so. In Jamaica, as in Barbados, there are ‘poor whites’ who are ranked below the brown, black, Indian and Chinese middle classes and who lack any access to white-skin privilege.

In the Anglophone Caribbean there has been a move away from a clearly demarcated phenotype based on European norms as the basis of a judgement of whiteness. The white norm now can also be light or light-brown, as long as this is allied with wealth. So while whiteness might be mobile in terms of the bodies that can occupy that space, it still relates to the distribution of wealth, opportunity and prestige, notwithstanding poor white populations. In the Dominican Republic and Cuba, whiteness tends to be defined much more in terms of what is perceived as the European – in this case, Spanish-phenotypical norms even if, as is the case in the Dominican Republic, there is an acknowledgement that the population is mixed, ‘black behind the ears’, and white skin is no longer the aesthetic ideal (Candelario, 2007). As an identification and position of privilege, whiteness is still very present in the twenty-first-century Caribbean and it brings with it specific Caribbean racisms in terms of structural inequalities based on skin colour, wealth and status, as well as cultural approximation to that which is seen as ‘European’ and ‘not African’. This chapter looks at the emergence of Caribbean whiteness in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago; interrogates the meanings, paradoxes and affects of Caribbean whiteness as creolized in contrast with metropolitan whiteness; and thinks through the failure of whiteness when it is no longer the aesthetic ideal. First, let us look at the emergence of the white racial category in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Whites in the Caribbean: settlement, creolization and domination

Reverse racism in Jamaica is what the white (expat) minority say they experience. When their children go to school they are an oddity, hair gets pulled and they get teased for their ‘whiteness’. It’s a common excuse offered for the withdrawal from normal schools