**“Marrying light”: Skin Colour, Gender and Marriage in Jamaica, c. 1918-1980.**

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While historians have increasingly examined inter-racial marriage, they have so far paid scant attention to intraracial marriage. This article tries to fill this gap in the scholarship by examining the practice of ‘marrying light’ in Jamaica from c. 1918 to 1980. Based on a wide range of sources, including memoirs and autobiographical fiction, it is particularly concerned with the motives for cross-colour marriage and the ways in which African-Jamaican children learned that ‘marrying light’ was an ideal to aspire to. It shows that colour, gender and class intersected in complex ways in ‘marrying light’ and that in most instances cross-colour marriages in Jamaica, like elsewhere, were a trade-off between one high-ranking variable and another. Due to the limitations of the source material, the article does not fully explore the extent of ‘marrying light’ and the quality of cross-colour marriages.

Keywords: Caribbean, Jamaica, race, discrimination, marriage, gender, class.

**Introduction**

In 1962, Jamaica became an independent state. This achievement did not end the practice of ‘marrying light’; that is, the preference of men and women of African descent to marry someone of a lighter skin tone. They did so mainly to ‘raise the colour’ of their offspring because, as class and colour were closely entwined in Jamaican society, light-skinned African Jamaicans had greater opportunities for social mobility than their darker-skinned peers. This article provides a history of ‘marrying light’ in Jamaica during the era of decolonisation; that is, from the end of the First World War (WWI) until the late 1970s.

The experiences of African-Jamaican soldiers during the war and upon their return to the island along with a rise in nationalist organisations in the 1920s increased discontent with Jamaica’s colonial status. This and labour riots in the late 1930s led the colonial government to adopt measures to increase political participation. The experiences of the Second World War (WWII) and especially pressure from the US to adopt colonial reforms led to major constitutional changes in the 1940s and 1950s, eventually resulting in self-government for Jamaica and the formation of the West Indies Federation (WIF), which was envisioned by the imperial government as a means to achieve West Indian independence. In 1961, the Jamaican people voted to leave the WIF and a year later the island became independent. In the two decades following independence, successive governments tried to give shape to the new nation state.

This study, which is part of a larger project on the role of race and colour in Jamaica during the era of decolonisation,[[1]](#endnote-1) is particularly concerned with the motives for ‘marrying light’. Second, it aims to assess the methods by which African Jamaicans learned that ‘marrying light’ was an ideal to aspire to. It will demonstrate that during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the expansion of secondary education and an increase in jobs the tertiary sector also due to the Black Power Movement the ideal to ‘marry light’ lessened somewhat but that throughout the period light skin very much remained, what one contemporary called (Lee, 182), a prized possession on the marriage market. This was largely because of the centuries-long valorisation of white and by extension light skin. Socialisation into white, European norms and values through, amongst others, the educational system, and the fact that whites, who constituted less than two per cent of the total population, continued to hold most of the socio-economic power, do much to explain the premium placed on white and light skin in the decades before and after independence.

By exploring the motives for ‘marrying light’ and the methods by which African Jamaicans learned to aspire to this ideal, the following will first of all contribute to historical scholarship on the Anglophone Caribbean. Historians of the Anglophone Caribbean have focussed mostly on the period of slavery but in the last two decades, the post-emancipation period has been receiving much attention, especially the interwar years (Bolland, 2006; Brereton, 2006). While there are now various historical studies that deal with the early twentieth century (e.g. Altink, 2011; Bourbonnais, 2017; Chamberlain, 2010; De Barros, 2014; Holt, 1992; Palmer, 2014; Riley, 2005; Rowe, 2013), few historians have addressed the post-independence period, leaving the more recent history to social scientists.[[2]](#endnote-2) Furthermore, and contrary to historical scholarship on Latin America, existing work on the twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean has largely shied away from exploring racial practices and discourse. Scholars have addressed the existence of a complex colour-class hierarchy and the more obvious forms of white-on-black discrimination, such as the ceiling faced by people of African descent in the Civil Service (e.g. Brown, 2011; Johnson, 2004; Richards, 2002; Smith, 2004), and some have also focussed on overt resistance to racial inequality, including Rastafarianism and the Black Power movement (e.g. Dunkley, 2013; Quinn, 2014; Swan, 2009). But lacking to date is a systematic exploration of all types of racial discrimination, including discrimination based on the lightness or darkness of one’s skin colour. Furthermore, existing historical studies on race in the twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean have largely ignored how Caribbean men and women talked about race and their attitudes towards race and colour and actual racial practices.[[3]](#endnote-3) By zooming in on the role of colour in marriage in Jamaica during the era of decolonisation, then, this study will go some way to enhance our understanding of racial practices and discourses in the Anglophone Caribbean.

But this study will also add to existing historical scholarship on interracial marriage. Interracial marriages have received considerable attention from historians. Especially US historians have done much to enhance our understanding of societal attitudes towards and the quality of marriages between men and women from different races (e.g. Hodes, 1997; Kennedy, 2003; Sollors, 2000). Yet surprisingly little work has been done since the publication of E. Franklin Frazier’s ground-breaking *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) on the history of intraracial relations in the US, including marriage between light- and dark-skinned African Americans.[[4]](#endnote-4) In fact, to date it has been mostly sociologists that have examined the role of skin colour in intraracial marriages in the US (e.g. Hamilton, Goldsmith and Darity Jr, 2009; Thompson and Keith, 2001).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Intraracial marriage has received more attention in scholarship on the Caribbean and Latin America, albeit less in historical than in sociological studies (e.g. Childers, 2016; Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Morrison, 2015; Nichols, 1996; Telles, 2005; Twine, 1998). This is not surprising because contrary to the US there was no *de jure* discrimination in the Caribbean and Latin America. Instead discrimination tended to take the form of subtle, informal means, ranging from racial jokes to preferential treatment in public places of those with white or light skin. These informal discriminatory practices along with race neutral practices, such as job criteria, helped to sustain a colour-class stratification. In much of the Caribbean and Latin America, this has taken the form of a three-tiered structure with whites on top, light-skinned people in the middle, and dark-skinned people at the bottom. Skin tone, then, was very important in Caribbean and Latin American societies and played a crucial role in decisions around marriage.

Based on a wide range of sources, including memoirs, published oral histories, and contemporary fiction, and informed by recent work on colourism (Green, 2008; Hunter 2005; Nakano Glenn 2009) – the practice of allocating privilege or disadvantage based on the lightness or darkness of someone’s skin –, this article will argue that African Jamaicans learned from an early age onwards to ‘marry light’ and that ‘marrying light’ was in most cases an exchange of one high-ranking variable for another. The article is divided into four parts. The first section traces the historical roots of ‘marrying light’. The second section explores how African-Jamaican children learned to internalise the ideal of ‘marrying light’ and pays particular attention to the role played by their immediate family and the role of class, while the third section examines the motives for ‘marrying light’. The last section not only summarises the reasons for and the facilitating factors of ‘marrying light’ during the period under discussion but also demonstrates that more than 50 years after independence ‘marrying light’ is still an ideal to which many African Jamaicans aspire because even today a high premium is placed on white and by extension light skin.

It needs to be stressed that the following focusses on the role of colour in marriages between African-Jamaican men and women. During the period under discussion, there were Jamaicans of mixed African and Chinese or Indian ancestry.[[6]](#endnote-6) Because of their small numbers – ‘Chinese coloured’ and ‘East Indian coloured’ each made up 0.4 per cent of the total population in 1943, rising to some 0.6 and 1.7 per cent respectively in 1960 (census 1943 and 1960) – and a lack of sources that shed light on their marrying preferences and practices, the following will exclude this group. However, as some of these men and women were relatively dark-skinned and they lived in a society that placed a premium on white and light skin, they too must have faced the pressure to ‘marry light’.

Another issue not addressed in this article is the quality of cross-colour marriages. Available sources shed little light on this issue and are instead primarily concerned with the ideal of ‘marrying light’ and people’s ambitions to achieve this aim. Although a growing field, especially since the introduction of cheaper methods of self-publishing, there are still relatively few memoirs and other first-hand accounts by African Jamaicans reflecting on the decades before and after independence. I have tried to supplement existing first-hand accounts with oral history, especially interviews with Jamaican-born migrants in the UK, but for various reasons struggled to find interviewees, ranging from a general reluctance of Jamaicans to talk about race and colour and my positionality as a white European woman. To unpack the ideal of ‘marrying light’ and people’s motivations for doing so, then, I have relied on an eclectic set of sources: memoirs and autobiographies; autobiographical fiction; published oral interviews; and sociological studies based on first-hand accounts. This material, especially the autobiographical, is not without its problems. Particularly, it raises questions about memory – how well did the authors remember past events, especially those relating to their childhood? – and in the case of autobiographical fiction one also has to consider the extent to which real events have been fictionalised. Furthermore, with regards to interviews conducted by other scholars, these were conducted to answer a different set of research questions and there is usually scant information about the interviewees. Finally, the first-hand material used in this study raises questions about representativeness. To what extent do those individuals who have published memoirs and other autobiographical material or who have participated in sociological studies represent the attitudes and opinions of the majority of African Jamaicans on ‘marrying light’ during the period under consideration? Most of the memoirs and autobiographies, for instance, were written by well-educated, middle-class men and women, who had moved away from Jamaica. Yet this eclectic material is the only thing we have to provide a bottom-up view on the role of ‘marrying light’ during the era of decolonisation.

Before continuing, I want to clarify the racial terminology used. As elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America, a wide range of terms has always been used in Jamaica to denote skin colour, existing alongside a local etiquette of racial terminology. Throughout the period under review, the Jamaican census always included a question about race and ethnic origin but the categories listed differed over time as table 1 illustrates [insert **table 1** here ]. To discuss ‘marrying light’, I do not use the census categories of ‘black’, ‘mixed’ or ‘coloured’ and other racial terminology used by historical actors as much of this is no longer socially acceptable. In line with recent work on colourism, I instead use the terms light-skinned and dark-skinned. To refer to both light- and dark-skinned Jamaicans, I have opted for the term African Jamaicans rather than Afro Jamaicans, African-descended Jamaicans, or black Jamaicans. And I use quotation marks to indicate contemporary racial terminology, such as ‘brown’ Jamaicans.

***Historical Background***

‘Marrying light’ was far from a novel practice in Jamaica in the decades leading up to independence. Its origins lay, like it did in other parts of the Americas, in slavery. Slave children fathered by white planters or overseers – often as a result of sexual violence – were given special privileges, such as exemption from field work, less violent treatment, and also greater opportunities for manumission, all on account of their closeness to white men and by definition of whiteness.[[7]](#endnote-7) This phenomenon occurred all over the Americas and set in motion, as Margaret Hunter (1998, 2005) has convincingly argued, a skin colour stratification process whereby a higher value was placed on people with light skin and where light-skinned people of African descent enjoyed greater privileges than their darker-skinned peers. White-on-black discrimination and colourism, then, should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Colourism would not exist without the colonisation of the Americas and the use of enslaved African labour on plantations, in mines, and elsewhere. These two processes – colonisation and slavery – led to an ‘ideology of white supremacy’, whereby white skin came to denote such positive values as ‘civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority’, and dark skin the opposite values of ‘savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority’. And this premium placed on whiteness meant that people with light skin were more likely to be seen as ‘intelligent and competent’ than those with dark skin, who were deemed stupid and incompetent (Hunter, 2005, pp. 2-6).

Because of their various privileges, including manumission, long before emancipation there was already a substantial class of light-skinned free(d)men in Jamaica. In 1834, they formed about 8.4 per cent of the total population (Livesay, 2018, p. 24). With emancipation in 1838, this class became the African-Jamaican elite as, contrary to the emancipated slaves, they owned houses and land. Because they were property owners, they were able to vote and also stand for election. Most of the politicians of African descent in the immediate post-emancipation period, then, were light-skinned men, such as Edward Jordan, the son of ‘free coloured’ parents and a newspaper proprietor, who sat on the Assembly, was appointed onto the Executive Committee and also served as island secretary and governor’s secretary (Holt, 1992, pp. 250 and 454). The economic and political success of the light-skinned elite did much to instil amongst the dark-skinned ex-slaves and their children the idea that light skin bestowed privilege and thus helped to foster a desire to ‘marry light’.

The ideal of ‘marrying light’ was further reinforced in the decades following the Morant Bay rebellion. In October 1865, several hundred African Jamaicans marched into the town of Morant Bay and attacked a police station before confronting the militia and parish authorities and killing eighteen people. In the days following, they killed two planters and attacked sugar plantations. Governor Eyre’s response to this rebellion was swift and brutal: nearly 400 African Jamaicans were killed in the month-long period of marital law, including the light-skinned politician George William Gordon, who was seen to have masterminded the rebellion (Heuman, 1994). To prevent another Morant Bay, Crown Colony government was instituted in 1867, which significantly reduced the political power of the light-skinned elite. The elected House of Assembly was replaced by an all-white nominated Legislative Council. In 1884 an elected element was added to the Legislative Council. The first elected African-Jamaican politicians were mostly light-skinned but by the late 1930s, there were also a significant number of dark-skinned elected politicians (Cariss, 1973).

In the interwar years, both light- and dark-skinned politicians strongly criticised the practice to appoint only whites – mostly expats – to senior positions in the Civil Service. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (2015, 2019), there were various dark-skinned politicians, such as the barrister J.A.G. Smith, who in addition voiced opposition to the entry criteria to the Civil Service. In 1911, the open Civil Service exam was abolished so that only those who had obtained the highest secondary school certificate and met various other criteria could apply to be put on a list of ‘approved candidates’. When a vacancy in the Civil Service occurred, a selection committee interviewed a number of people on the list and made a recommendation to the Governor. As fees for secondary education were high and relatively few scholarships were available and as the selection committee was made up of white expat officials known to hold racial and colour prejudices, most clerkships were held by the sons (and a few daughters) of the traditional light-skinned elite (Altink, 2015). But light skin also offered considerable advantages in the private sector, especially for client-facing positions. It was not uncommon, for instance, for employers – both white and African-Jamaican – to place adverts in local papers requiring light skin, such as ‘Help wanted: a fair and coloured girl to sell hosiery in an uptown store’ (‘Help wanted’, 1920, p.12).

Colourism, then, was not only an intra- but also an interracial phenomenon in interwar Jamaica. It was so firmly embedded in society that light skin had effectively become a form of ‘symbolic capital’ that could be converted into other forms of capital to enhance status. Symbolic capital, a term coined by Bourdieu (1991, p. 14), refers to accumulated prestige or honour that can help a person to amass ‘economic capital’ (material wealth) or ‘social capital’ (resources based on group membership, relationships and networks of influence and support).[[8]](#endnote-8) It was not uncommon, for instance, to see adverts in the *Gleaner*, the island’s biggest-selling newspaper, in which jobseekers highlighted their colour as an asset that they could bring to the job, such as ‘Position wanted: an experienced young woman (coloured) seeks position as infant’s nurse, waitress in home or restaurant or to do housekeeping’ (‘Position wanted’, 1940, p. 20).

As a result of the various historical processes described above, by the interwar years a variant of the three-tier hierarchy mentioned in the introduction had developed in which class and colour were intricately entwined. The bottom was formed by mostly dark-skinned Jamaicans engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled work. The middle rung was made up of predominantly light-skinned Jamaicans, who were mainly small planters, teachers, ministers, policemen, postmasters and clerks. And the top was made up of the less than 2 per cent whites in the island, who controlled the social, economic and political institutions. Just how much colour shaped Jamaican society before WWII is illustrated by the fact that the top consisted not just of very wealthy whites, such as sugar planters, barristers and other professionals, but also of owners and managers of small firms and plantation bookkeepers, and firmly excluded African-Jamaican professionals and businessmen. The latter, for instance, were never invited to the Governor’s house or other elite events.

Although the race and colour-make-up of the population changed over time, as table 2 suggests [**table 2 near here**],[[9]](#endnote-9) the class-colour hierarchy sketched above remained largely intact in the decades preceding and following independence. It needs to be stressed that the practices and policies of the colonial government before independence did much to sustain this hierarchy. As I and various other scholars working on pre-independent Jamaica have demonstrated (Altink 2011, 2015, 2019; Moore and Johnson, 2004; Paton; 2015; De Barros, 2014), not only did race and colour play a role in hiring practices in the public sector and in the allocation of government scholarships for prestigious secondary schools and higher education but the colonial government also passed legislation, often at the insistence of mainstream churches, that denigrated the culture and practices of lower-class Jamaicans. Furthermore, while post-independence governments hailed Jamaica as a ‘racial paradise’, they too passed legislation that was based on and helped to reinforce negative views of lower-class and invariably dark-skinned people. In 1963, for instance, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) government passed legislation that issued a mandatory minimum sentence for the possession of ganja (marijuana) of eighteen months with hard labour on a first offence and three years for a second and later offence. In the 1970s, the People’s National Party (PNP) government repealed the mandatory minimum sentence but the offence continued to carry a heavy penalty, ranging from a fine of J$100 or prison sentence of three months to a fine of J$2,000 or prison sentence of eighteen months. As ganja use had rapidly spread from the Rastafarian community to the lower classes in the 1950s and 1960s, the severe sentences for ganja possession, then, did much to reinforce racial stereotypes, associating blackness with crime and thus place lower-class and invariably dark-skinned people firmly at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

***Racial Socialisation***

To understand why so many African Jamaicans aimed to ‘marry light’, we need to know the meanings that African-Jamaican society attached to skin colour. This can be gained through an examination of the racial socialisation process – the implicit and explicit, deliberate and inadvertent, and verbal and non-verbal messages about race – of African-Jamaican children during the period under discussion. From an early age onwards, children learn in a variety of ways about race.[[10]](#endnote-10) Studies on racial socialisation have shown that parents are the primary source of racial socialisation messages. This literature has focussed mostly on African-American children in the post-civil rights era and has demonstrated that many parents give messages that aim to help children develop positive racial identities so that they can succeed in a racially-stratified society. They, for instance, teach children about their black heritage and in other ways promote feelings of self-worth and offer strategies that allow them to cope with racial adversity (Lesane-Brown, 2006). But racial socialisation messages differ across time and place. African-Jamaican parents in the decades before and after independence were largely silent on race or gave messages, such as ‘black is nuh good’, which negatively affected children’s self-esteem. And the strategies they offered their children to succeed in Jamaica’s stratified society were often unrealistic, such as the message to study hard to get a secondary school certificate, followed by a white-collar job.

African-Jamaican children learned early on that there was such a thing as a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ colour. They learned this lesson mostly from their mothers. Kathleen, born in 1919 and the darkest in her family, was repeatedly told by her light-skinned mother that she was too dark – a ‘throwback’, that her hair was wrong, and that she would never marry because she was ‘ugly’. Yet at the same time, her mother boasted about her light-skinned brother, who was ‘very handsome’ and ‘looks really white’ (Ford-Smith, 2005, pp. 55-67). Many other mothers in the decades before independence, even those who were dark themselves, told their darker children that ‘kinky hair was bad’, that ‘brown was better than black’ and that ‘white was best’ (Abrahams, 2000, p. 197).

The various implicit and explicit verbal messages were reinforced by a range of overt and subtle practices. Dark-skinned children were usually treated less favourably than their lighter siblings. For instance, Beverley Manley, born during WWII, was given more chores to do around the house than her ‘brown’ sisters (Manley, 2008, p. 17), while Kathleen was beaten more often than her siblings. Many mothers also forbade their children, especially the lighter ones, from playing with dark-skinned children. The Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall, for example, could only bring friends home, whom his parents deemed to be ‘equals in social status and of the “right” colour’ (Hall, 2017, p. 54). Also through their use of hair-straighteners and skin-bleachers, giving children picture books with white characters, and various other practices did mothers impart messages about the ‘right colour’. But fathers also helped to instil ideas about race and colour. Until long after independence, men not blessed with ‘good hair’ often wore hats or caps or cut their hair very short, which taught children that race was not just about skin colour but also physical features, in particular hair but also nose breadth, eyes and other racial features (Abrahams, 2000, p. 250). One woman remembered that when she grew up during the interwar years, she and others looked up to those who had a ‘cool colour and a lovely head of hair, and lovely eyes . . . full eyes’ (Brodber, 1980, no. 27mfc).

Alongside these more general messages about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ colour,[[11]](#endnote-11) African-Jamaican children also learned that ‘marrying light’ – or ‘marrying up’ as it was also often called – was an ideal to which to aspire. For example, Joyce Gladwell, the daughter of two light-skinned teachers, often heard her mother say that she was glad she had married a ‘“good brown man” and not someone darker or of the same colouring as herself, rather as another woman might applaud herself on managing to catch a rich husband’ (Gladwell, 1969, p. 23). Joyce and her sister, furthermore, had ‘no doubt whatever that my mother expected us to choose a husband who was at least the same colouring as ourselves, if not lighter’ (Gladwell, 1969, p. 24).

Children also overheard adults speaking disapprovingly about those who had married ‘down’ in colour. For instance, in 1950, a US sociologist who attended a wedding in Kingston overheard ‘whispers of horror’ because the ‘groom was a Negro’ (‘Women’, 1950, p. 27), while sociologist Jack Alexander (1977, p. 427) was told in the late 1960s by one of his informants that when Winnie married Tom, everyone in the family ‘would talk about it, and say [spoken in a whisper] “and he is very dark”’. And another way in which children learned that they should aim to ‘marry light’ was through songs and games. A traditional ring game that mimicked marriage was ‘brown girl in the ring’, the song of which was recorded and popularised by Boney M. in 1978. In this game, a ‘brown girl’ stands in the ring and is asked ‘to show me your partner’ (‘Games played’, n.d.). That it was a ‘brown girl’ who gets to choose the partner did much to convey to dark-skinned boys that a light-skinned girl was the ideal wife, while dark-skinned girls were effectively told that they were not desirable.

As children got older, some parents put considerable pressures upon them to ‘marry light’. It needs to be stressed, however, that as in various other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean, marriage was not the dominant relationship type in Jamaica. Broadly speaking, there were three types of relationships: a visiting union (a casual relationship), a common-law union (cohabitation), and marriage. The latter was the least common type: in 1943 only 30 per cent of men aged 15 and older were married, compared to 28.5 per cent of women (Roberts, 1957, p. 267). Marriage was far more common amongst middle-class than lower-class Jamaicans as it was, as I have illustrated elsewhere (Altink, 2011, Chapter 2), an important marker of middle-class respectability. The marriage rate went up over time but even by 1960, only 42.6 per cent of all women aged 15 and older were married (Schlesinger, 1968, p. 138). It was not uncommon for men and women to move from a visiting union to a common-law union and finally marriage with the same or a different partner. As a result, the age of marriage was relatively high. In the early 1940s, the average age of marriage for men was 34.1 and women 28.6, and many men and women married long after the birth of their child(ren) (Roberts, 1957, p. 293).

As mentioned, marriage was an important marker of middle-class status in Jamaican society, especially in the decades leading up to independence, and class and colour were closely entwined.[[12]](#endnote-12) As such, it was particularly middle-class parents and those aspiring to middle-class status, who put pressure on their children to ‘marry light’. For instance, in the early 1920s, the parents of a young dark-skinned farmer forbade him to marry the dark-skinned girl that he had impregnated but did not object when he decided to marry another girl, equally pregnant but ‘highly coloured’ (Brodber, 1980, no. 2cfb). Trevor Rhone’s play *Old Story Time* (1979), which is set in the 1940s, provides a fictional account of this pressure that aspiring middle-class parents put upon their children to ‘marry light’. The mother repeatedly tells her dark-skinned son: ‘How much time A must tell you, don’t mix with the little dutty black gal [dirty black girl] dem in the district? How much time a must tell you, anything black nuh good?’. At the same time, she praises the virtues of the light-skinned daughter of the local minister: ‘A nice brown girl with tall hair down her back. She is advancement, you hear me.’ (Rhone, 1987, p. 14).

The light-skinned elite, on the other hand, was concerned to maintain their position in the social order and therefore tried to protect their ‘symbolic capital’ by telling their children not to ‘marry down’, especially their daughters as they gave birth to the next generation. In the early 1940s, the father of Norma Marsh – the wife of Olympian champion Arthur Wint – told his daughter that she was not going ‘to marry any black man’ (Wint, 2012, p. 22). And although Clare, the main character in Michelle Cliff’s autobiographical novel *Abeng* (1984) was never threatened by her father, she firmly realised that he expected her ‘to preserve his green eyes and light skin’ and if possible ‘turn the green eyes blue, once and for all – and make the skin, now gold, become pale and subject to visible sunburn’ (Cliff, 1995, p. 127). But some parents went a step further and not just threatened their daughters. When Stuart Hall’s sister started dating a boy from another Caribbean island and ‘a highly respectable black background’, his mother ‘simply put a stop to it’ (Hall, 2017, p. 53).

That it was hard for African-Jamaican young men and women to resist the various verbal and non-verbal messages that ‘black is nu good’ and the insistence to ‘marry light’ can be seen in their dating choices. Beverley Manley (2008, p. 63), for instance, admitted in her memoir that her mother’s insistence that ‘black is nuh good’ had led her to date mostly white men. And many young men and women felt compelled ‘to marry someone fair enough to “lift” the colour of their offspring’ (Morris, 1964, p. 25). In fact, by the late 1920s, ‘to raise the colour’ was already a common expression in Jamaica.[[13]](#endnote-13) That it was especially the offspring of the traditional light-skinned elite or upwardly mobile parents, who felt the pressure to ‘marry light’ can be concluded, amongst others, from wedding pictures in the *Gleaner*. Like the social events featuring in the paper today, the weddings it reported during the era of decolonisation tended to feature upper-class and upper-middle class Jamaicans. Until at least the late 1960s, the photos accompanying these reports showed mostly brides several shades lighter than the grooms. Christopher Charles (2011, p. 383) has shown that adverts for skin bleachers in the post-war period played into the consideration of colour in marriage. The brand Nadinola, for instance, used such captions as ‘he never came until I discovered Nadinola skin color’ or ‘look how men flock around the girl with the clear, bright Nadinola complexion’.

***Motives for ‘Marrying Light’***

Contrary to the games played by African-Jamaican children, in the real Jamaican marriage market, it was men who chose their partner. Men could trade their education, job and other assets for a wife. Until the 1960s when secondary education was more widely available and there was an increase in jobs in the tertiary sector, women had generally little of value to trade but their beauty. In Jamaica as in other former slave societies in the Americas, because of the premium placed on whiteness, a non-white woman, whose skin was closest to white was deemed the most attractive,[[14]](#endnote-14) while a woman whose skin was the furthest removed from white was seen as the least attractive. In August 1938, the *Gleaner* published an account by a light-skinned, middle-class man, who had moved to England and married a lower-class white girl. He justified his decision to marry her largely with reference to her attractiveness: ‘it does not seem to me so astonishing that a man of colour should be attracted by a blond girl’ (‘Why I married’, 1938, p. 32).

Many dark-skinned men aimed to ‘marry light’ not just because light-skinned women were seen as more attractive or to ‘raise the colour’ of potential offspring. A wife’s light skin, even if she was lower class, bestowed status upon a husband and could provide him with entry into certain circles. Even by the early 1950s, it was still the case that ‘fair people’ would not ‘befriend a black man and invite him to their home’ unless he had a ‘fair or white wife’ (Henriques, 1951, pp. 117-18). In other words, a man could convert his wife’s light skin into ‘social capital’. Dudley Thompson (1993, p. 8), a leading politician in the 1960s, mentioned in his memoir that his mother, who came from a wealthy family, had added to his father’s ‘prestige’ because she was ‘light-skinned, almost white in complexion [and] had long brown hair’. And the prestige of his father, a school teacher, had increased even further when the marriage had produced ‘children of a richer colour’.

It was particularly upwardly mobile black men, like Dudley Thompson’s father, who aimed to enhance their prestige by ‘marrying light’. The sociologist Adam Kruijer (1969, p. 23) found in his 1969 study of a rural Jamaican community that it was mostly teachers and preachers in this community, who preferred to marry lighter-skinned women. Even as late as the 1950s, a successful dark-skinned man, who had married someone of a similar or darker shade, was seen as having thrown away his ‘only opportunity’ of ‘raising his colour’ (Henriques, 1951, pp. 117-18).

Light-skinned women, on the other hand, realised that their skin colour was a form of ‘symbolic capital’ that they could convert into ‘economic capital’ by marrying someone with a well-paid job or other significant means of income. Or as one commentator concluded in 1969, ‘often in order to get married, she had to barter the colour of her skin for the prestige of wealth offered by a man darker than herself in exchange for taking him a step or two up the social scale’ (Weller, 1969, p. 5). This trade-off of skin colour and economic security is well-conveyed in Easton Lee’s poem ‘Poor Aunt Margaret’, based on his experiences growing up in rural Jamaica in the late 1930s and early 1940s.[[15]](#endnote-15) ‘Of all her racially mixed up relatives’, Aunt Margaret was the ‘lightest in colour, blue-green eyes, “good” long brown hair, freckles galore dotter her fair face.’ Even though many men ‘sought the prize’, she rejected all but a war veteran. He had a ‘deep dark handsome honest face’ and on the wedding day ‘smiled happily and openly at everyone signalling his triumph’. Although she gained much by marrying this dark-skinned man – he loved her and provided well for her –, her socialisation into ‘black is nuh good’ meant that until the day she died, Aunt Margaret told everyone that her husband ‘was not really black’ and that his skin tone was the result of working a lot in the sun (Lee, 1998, p. 182).

The ‘black is nuh good’ ethos also does much to explain why many dark-skinned women wanted to ‘marry up’. For many lower-class black women, however, the main motive for ‘marrying light’ was ‘to raise the colour’, which should be seen in light of the high value that their society placed on motherhood, which, as I have explained elsewhere, was largely an African carry-over (Altink, 2011, Chapter 3). They firmly realised that light-skinned children were more likely to succeed in society than dark-skinned children because of the premium placed on white or light skin. However, there was no guarantee that ‘marrying light’ would produce light-skinned children as skin colour, like eye colour, is not a blend of the parents. Natasha Manley, the daughter resulting from Beverly Manley’s marriage to the light-skinned Michael Manley (see **illustration 1**),[[16]](#endnote-16) for example, was not a blend of her parents’ skin colours but much closer in shade to her mother’s.

Margaret Hunter has argued for the US that the propensity of black men to want to marry light-skinned women creates a ‘queue of women where the lightest-skinned women are positioned with the highest status at the front of the queue’ (Hunter, 1998, p. 522). This was also the case for Jamaica in the decades before and after independence. Dark-skinned women who had the least to offer on the marriage market – lower-class women – were at the back of the queue, and many of them as a result had to forego marriage, especially in the interwar years when there was a significant excess of women because of male outmigration.[[17]](#endnote-17) Because of their desire ‘to raise the colour’, many lower-class, dark-skinned women did not object, then, to a sexual relationship with a light-skinned or white man, even if they knew he would never marry them. One rural woman, for instance, told the social psychiatrist Madeline Kerr (1952, p. 96) in the 1940s: ‘I could never love a black man. Black and black breed picknies [children] like monkeys. I always want my picknies to be as light as possible.’ It was not uncommon, however, for the white or light-skinned man in question, especially if he was of a higher class, to end the relationship once the woman became pregnant – as mentioned in the example of the farmer’s son in the previous section – or shortly after she had given birth. Alice Wadham, for instance, was the daughter of a dark-skinned mother and light-skinned father. Her father ignored her until his mother, who had always claimed that Alice was not his daughter, had died. Yet by that time, when Alice was nine, it was too late as her mother forbade him to see her (Bauer and Thompson, 2006, p. 57).

As the Jamaican census did not correlate race and colour with marital status during the period under discussion, it is not possible to assess the extent of cross-colour marriage over time. It seems, however, that the expansion of secondary education, especially an increase in scholarships for prestigious secondary schools, and growth of the labour market in the years just before and following independence somewhat reduced the importance of colour in mate selection. More dark-skinned women were then able to bring an asset to the marriage market – a secondary-school degree or savings from a clerical job, which may have levelled their skin colour, while a secondary or even a tertiary education – from 1948 onwards tertiary education was available in the island – and well-paid job may have made dark-skinned men look less ‘black’ to light-skinned women (Nettleford, 1970, p. 31). It should also not be ruled out that the Black Power movement with its insistence on ‘black is beautiful’ may have changed at least some people’s views on the importance of colour in mate selection. Black Power in Jamaica, which was largely confined to educated, middle-class young men and women, was related to but different from that in North America. It too was an attempt to change long-standing prejudices against black people and the negative stereotyping of Africa. But because it was articulated in a black-majority as opposed to a black-minority context, class played as an important role as race. Furthermore, Jamaican Black Power was largely a response to the failure of government to fulfil the expectations raised by independence and offered a fierce critique of the foreign ownership of the island’s major resources and the domination of the local economy by minority local elites. (Lewis, 2014; Quinn, 2014).

Similarly the high-profile marriages of the politicians Edward Seaga and Michael Manley to African-Jamaican women may have changed some people’s views on intra(and inter)racial marriages. In 1965, Seaga, the Minister of Welfare and Development who was of Lebanese descent, married Mitsy Constantine, a former Miss Jamaica. The wedding was broadcast live and some 15,000 people gathered at the Kingston parish church to see the couple (‘Thousand witness’, 1965, p. 14). And while the wedding (see i**llustration 2)** in 1972 of the light-skinned Prime Minister Michael Manley to the dark-skinned Beverley Anderson, a TV presenter, was a private affair, the couple regularly appeared in public and may equally have instilled the idea that a white or light-skinned man would not lose status by ‘marrying down’.

Yet for most young men and women in the post-independence period colour remained an important consideration when dating or considering marriage. In the late 1960s, 475 secondary-school children were asked to describe a ‘handsome boy’ or ‘beautiful girl’. For almost 75 per cent of the respondents, the ‘handsome boy’ or ‘beautiful girl’ was not white but one or two shades removed from white with ‘Caucasian features’. In fact, ‘fair’ – ‘the colour one associates with a deeply tanned or sun-burnt white person’ – was the most popular choice (Miller, 1969). Another study amongst adolescents carried out around the same time also paid attention to the role of colour both with regards to self-esteem and physical attraction. One of the female participants described herself as black but wished she “could be born again and become a bit clearer” and she mostly liked “white boys” (Phillips, 1973, p. 41).

The ideal of ‘marrying light’, then, remained strong throughout the era of decolonisation. Few Jamaicans criticised this ideal and people’s ambitions to achieve it because they were fully aware that light skin bestowed significant privileges and also because it was not deemed respectable to openly talk about race and colour in Jamaican society, even long after independence.[[18]](#endnote-18) In the 1930s, the dark-skinned educator Amy Bailey wrote several articles in the magazine *Public Opinion,* exposing Jamaica’s colourism. While she was fiercely critical of the colour discrimination on the labour market, she was less disapproving of ‘marrying light’. While she called the practice a ‘sickening disease’ and evidence of dark-skinned people’s ‘inferiority complex’, she fully realised the benefits it could bestow upon someone and their future offspring and therefore did not condemn individuals, who had decided to marry across colour lines. (Bailey, 1937, p. 10). It is also striking that some outspoken critics of race and colour discrimination in the Civil Service and other areas of public life in the interwar years, such as the politicians Dr Oswald E. Anderson and J.A.G. Smith, refrained from addressing the role of race and colour in the private sphere, including marriage. In the case of Anderson, it may be because he himself was light-skinned and had thus experienced the advantages it could bestow. As for the dark-skinned barrister J.A.G. Smith, it is likely that he realised that it was much harder to end colour discrimination outside the state and labour market.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The rise of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s did not, as one would perhaps expect, lead to a sharp increase in criticism of ‘marrying light’. Black Power activists in fact tended to avoid the issue of colourism altogether because of the movement’s emphasis on black unity and more importantly, its embrace of Marxist thought, which meant that racism was seen in strictly white-black terms and as a proxy for economic exploitation. Yet some influenced by Black Power did address the practice. For the Reverend Ashley Smith of the United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman,[[20]](#endnote-20) for instance, Black Power meant a ‘positive approach to self’. He held up skin bleaching, hair strengthening and also ‘marrying light’ as going against this ‘Black Power philosophy’ (‘Black Power’, 1972, p. 7). But most Jamaicans in the 1960s and 1970s continued to accept the practice of ‘marrying light’. For example, a light-skinned man who himself had ‘married down’, mentioned in the early 1970s that although he preferred his children to marry someone of a similar shade, he would not stand in their way if they decided to ‘marry up’ (Brodber, 1980, no. 29 mmb).

***Conclusion and Epilogue***

The desire to ‘marry light’ in the decades before and after independence, then, resulted largely from the socialisation into the ethos ‘black is nuh good’, which was carried over from slavery and which even the Black Power Movement of the late 1960s failed to undermine significantly. Parents not only instilled the notion that ‘black is nuh good’ in myriad ways but also gave specific messages relating to the colour of a future spouse, and some did not hesitate to pressure their children into selecting the right-colour husband or wife. The foregoing has shown that gender, colour and class intersected in complex ways in cross-colour marriages. It was mostly the traditional light-skinned elite and upwardly mobile black families, who were keen for their children to ‘marry light’ but in the case of the former there was a greater concern to prevent their daughters from ‘marrying down’, while the latter were particularly concerned for their sons to ‘marry up’. In many instances, cross-colour marriages were a trade-off between the ‘symbolic capital’ of skin colour – mostly of the wife, as many women tended to bring less to the marriage market than men and also because physical attractiveness is generally more valued in women than men – and the ‘economic capital’ of a good job, property or other forms of income.

The ‘black is nuh good’ ethos has lessened in recent decades. In 1992, for instance, the dark-skinned P. J. Patterson became Prime Minister, something unthinkable in the 1950s or early 1960s. Yet light skin is still highly valued, especially in women. For various client-facing positions employers, especially in the tourist industry, still value light-skinned staff.[[21]](#endnote-21) And light-skin often offers better treatment in restaurants, hotels, and various other areas of life. The women chosen to represent Jamaica at international beauty competitions amply demonstrate that light skin is still a prized possession.[[22]](#endnote-22) With a few exceptions, such as Davina Bennett, a fairly dark girl with an Afro, most of the women crowned Miss Universe Jamaica have been lighted skinned, including Emily Maddison, the most recently crowned Miss. And the popularity of skin bleaching equally highlights that dark skin is seen as less valuable.[[23]](#endnote-23) As such, the Jamaican marriage market has continued to place a premium on light skin. A male college student recently told a researcher that because of growing up as the darkest member of the family, he now mostly dated ‘brown’ women (Nation, 2015). And while many parents may no longer pressure their children into ‘marrying light’, many are still upset and disappointed when their children ‘marry down’ (e.g. Abrahams, 2014, p. A8; ‘Editorial’, 2017).

Perhaps even more than during the era of decolonisation, it is upwardly mobile dark-skinned men who prefer to ‘marry light’, a phenomenon one newspaper reporter has referred to as ‘intimate partner colourism’ (Davis, 2016). Usain Bolt, Jamaica’s most famous son, exemplifies this phenomenon. In 2012, the *Jamaica Observer* published a photograph of Bolt kissing his then white Slovakian girlfriend. This called forward much debate on social media. While some accused Bolt of having a ‘white woman complex’, most men found little fault with Bolt because for them, white or light-skinned women were simply more attractive (Colly-Durand, 2012). Since his breakup from the Slovakian girlfriend, the colour of Bolt’s love life has remained an issue of public interest. In response to an interview that the athlete gave on Jamaican television in 2016, one of the island’s leading commentators, Professor Carolyn Cooper, suggested that he marry a ‘black woman’.[[24]](#endnote-24) On social media, many accused her of ‘racism’ – a common strategy used in Jamaica to deny the salience of race and colour on the labour market and elsewhere – and said that Bolt should marry whoever he wants. [[25]](#endnote-25) Not long after the interview, Bolt started dating the light-skinned model Kasi Bennett. This did not surprise many because, as one commentator said, ‘black men’ date or marry only light-skinned women ‘when they come into some money’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Today, then, cross-colour marriage is Jamaica is still seen as a trade-off between the ‘symbolic capital’ of light skin and the ‘economic capital’ of wealth. Light skin still bestows numerous privileges – both directly on those with light skin and indirectly on those who associate with them. However, the presence of social media now acts as a powerful barrier to criticism of the practice because those, like Professor Carolyn Cooper, who dare to address it – whether in traditional or on social media –, can find themselves the victim of online harassment. There is thus still a strong unwritten rule in Jamaican society not to talk about colour in public. But unless colourism is openly addressed, shade will continue to govern intimate relations, which means that some – mostly dark-skinned women – will continue be left at the back of the ‘queue’.

1. See my forthcoming *Public Secrets: race and colour in colonial and independent Jamaica*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, anthropologist David Scott’s *Omens of Adversity* (2014), which explores the Grenada Revolution, and anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas’ study of the 1963 clash between Jamaican police and Rastafarians at Coral Gardens near Montego Bay in her *Exceptional Violence* (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On racial attitudes, see for instance Ferguson and Cramer (2007) and Potter (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The few historical works that have addressed colour and marriage have done so often as part of a larger study on African-American communities (e.g. Bodenhorn, 2006; Bogger, 1997; Gatewood, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is not to say that skin colour discrimination and stratification is unique to countries in the Americas. Colour has also played and still plays a very important role in many Asian societies and the Asian diaspora, including influencing decisions to marry. In fact, out of 312 cultures across the globe, in 51 skin colour is an important marker of beauty. And in all but 4 of those 51, preference is given to lighter skin (Burke, 2008). On the role of skin colour in marriage in Asia and the diaspora, see for instance (Prashad, 2000). And on marriage and skin colour in Africa, see for example, (Fokuo, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chinese and Indians did marry African Jamaicans but both groups preferred endogamy. Especially Indians disapproved of interracial marriage. The term ‘dougla’, for instance, is a derogatory term used across the Caribbean to denote offspring of Indians and people of African descent (Shibata, 2005, pp. 63-65). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. On the status of mixed-race slaves and free(d)men in Jamaica, see (Heuman, 1981; Livesay, 2012; Petley, 2005). Livesay has shown that over the course of the eighteenth century, the attitude of members of Jamaica’s white plantocracy hardened towards mixed-race free(d)men. In the early part of the century, they envisioned bolstering the white population by granting special privileges to mixed-race people. But by the end of the century, they began to limit these privileges, imposing for instance caps on the inheritance bequests of illegitimate mixed-race offspring. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On light skin as symbolic capital, see (Green, 2008; Hunter, 2005; Nakano Glenn 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Partly due to changes in the classification system and a move over time from census takers to self-entry. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Even children as old as three are far from colour-blind and use the racial concepts and language of larger society in their interaction with each other and can interpret racial differences with some degree of sophistication, such as in excluding some but not other children from play (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. These messages had considerable impact. By 1983, some 48.3 per cent of pre-school children in rural Jamaica displayed a pronounced pro-white bias (Bagley and Young, 1988, p 54). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The ability to marry across ‘shades’ was to some extent circumscribed by residential segregation. As Colin Clarke (1975) has demonstrated, dark-skinned people tended to live in West Kingston, whites in the hills around the city and light-skinned people more or less lived in between these two groups, reflecting their intermediary status. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On the expression, see (Allsopp and Allsopp, 2003, p. 464). On its common use in the 1920s, see for instance (Johns, 1929, p. 16). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I have discussed the sexualisation of light-skinned African-Jamaican women before WWII in my *Destined for a Life of Service* (2011). For the rise of this phenomenon, see Mohammed (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Easton Lee is the son of a Chinese father and an African-Jamaican mother. The poem refers to the aunt on his mother’s side. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. ‘Prime Minister Manley, Mrs. Manley, and daughter Natasha’. *National Library of Jamaica Digital Collection.* Retrieved from http://nljdigital.nlj.gov.jm/items/show/1672. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In 1921, there were 881 men per 1,000 women (Roberts, 1957, p. 72). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Race and colour discrimination was in fact a public secret – everyone knew it existed but it was not talked about in public – and those who dared to expose it were often vilified. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The American race leader W.E.B. DuBois (1920, p. 16) fully realised that it would take therefore much longer for African Americans to achieve social than political equality. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The church was the result of a union in 1965 between the Presbyterian Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands and the Congregational Church of Jamaica. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See, for instance, the furore caused in 2011 when it became known that HEART, the government’s skills training and certification agency, had complied with demands from certain employers to send them only light-skinned trainees (Altink, 2015, p. 45). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The Jamaican novelist and poet Kei Miller has used his blog ‘Under the saltire flag’ to address the role of colour in the beauty contests and also in other areas of life, see <https://underthesaltireflag.com>. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Many studies have been published in recent years that examine the growing phenomenon of skin bleaching, in particular the motives for the practice, which is particularly prevalent amongst lower-class Jamaicans. For a good introduction, see (Charles, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Cooper’s online comment on a *Gleane*r’s article at <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20160125/usain-bolt-beating-classism-and-racism-jamaica> [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For reactions to Cooper’s comments, see <http://z15.invisionfree.com/SprintZone/index.php?showtopic=8607> [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. As narrated on the online forum Springzone at <https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/sprintzone/usain-bolt-is-an-horrible-neighbour-t8607.html>

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