

Questioning Whiteness: “Who is white?”

—A case study of Barbados and Trinidad—

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Abstract

This paper seeks to produce knowledge of identity as European-descended white in the Caribbean islands of Barbados and Trinidad, where the white populations account for 2.7% and 0.7% respectively, of the total population. Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with 29 participants who are subjectively and objectively white, in August 2016 and February 2017 in order to obtain primary data, as a means of creating oral history. Many of the whites in Barbados recognise their interracial family background, and possess no reluctance for having interracial marriage and interracial children. They have very weak attachment to white hegemony. On contrary, white Trinidadians insist on their racial purity as white and show their disagreement towards interracial marriage and interracial children. The younger generations in both islands say white supremacy does not work anymore, yet admit they take advantage of whiteness in everyday life. The elder generation in Barbados say being white is somewhat disadvantageous, but their Trinidadian counterparts are very proud of being white which is superior form of racial identity. The paper revealed the sense of colonial superiority is rooted in the minds of whites in Barbados and Trinidad, yet the younger generations in both islands tend to deny the existence of white privilege and racism in order to assimilate into the majority of the society, which is non-white.

1. Background

Societies in the Caribbean are not homogeneous, due to what we today call globalisation, and mostly due to their diverse colonial histories. Both Barbados and Trinidad were former British colonies - while Barbados had been a British colony from the beginning to the end of its colonial history, Trinidad however, was under the governance of Spain, France and Britain during the course of its history. This difference in their colonial histories resulted in the differences in the demographic composition of the two islands.

Barbados has approximately 92.3% of African-descended population, of which 2.7% is white, and the rest is shared mainly by East Indians and Chinese^[1]. In Trinidad, on the other hand, 37.1% of the

population is East Indian, 31.6% is African-descended, 0.7% is white, the rest comprises Chinese, Syrian/Lebanese, and others^[2]. This means, 2.7% of the population of Barbados and 0.7% of the population of Trinidad claimed they were white. Yet, we are not sure if all those self-claimed whites are really white, because there is no concrete definition of “who is white” that has been agreed upon, even for the purposes of the census.

The research question of this paper “who is white?”, is based on the researcher’s previous research on the whiteness of the French Creoles in Trinidad^[3], who consider themselves to be pure white and descendants of the French aristocracy. During the interviews with those French Creoles, many of them showed discomfort when they were treated as

European-descended white or just simply white. They were not just white, but they were French Creoles, or French-descended white, although some of them were mixed with Scottish, Irish, Germans, Portuguese or Syrian/Lebanese. From this experience, the question of “who is white in Trinidad anyway?” emerged, and this paper also applies the same question in the context of Barbados. As such, the word “white” in this paper refers to someone of European descendant, and excludes Syrian/Lebanese, Central and South Americans who can sometimes pass as white, and expatriates who stay in the Caribbean for the sojourn.

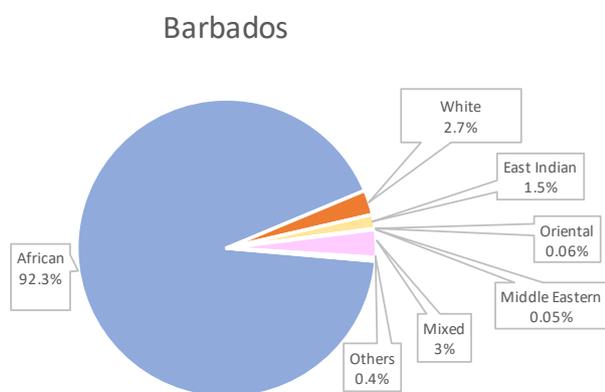


Figure 1. Demographic composition in Barbados

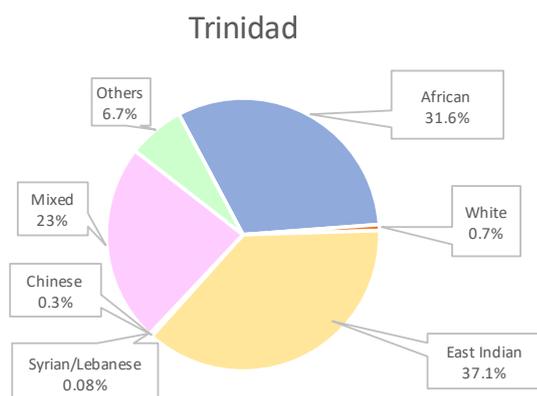


Figure 2. Demographic composition in Trinidad

2. Introduction

This paper explores questions of identity as a

European-descended white, in the Caribbean islands of Barbados and Trinidad, and examines who is considered white and what constitutes their whiteness in relation to non-white others. Studies on whiteness have been popular, particularly since the turn of the century, in the United States^[4], Europe^[5], African countries that are former colonies of Europe^[6], and east Asia^[7], especially Japan^[8], where exists a massive skin-whitening market for women who are obsessed to become like Caucasians. In comparing the existing studies of whiteness around the world, it is significant that there is a paucity of such studies on whiteness in the Caribbean.

This study examines the identities of whites in Barbados and Trinidad in relation to how whiteness is constructed, as a result of interactions with non-white others. This study is based on the assumption that whiteness in Barbados and Trinidad, or more simply, what makes people white, or who constitutes the white societies in those two islands, is not the same. However, due to constraints associated with the length of this paper, this paper only examines exactly who the whites are in the two islands.

In order to obtain primary data on who is white in Barbados and Trinidad, face-to-face individual interviews with 29 participants, were conducted in August 2016 and February 2017, as a means of creating oral history. In total, two weeks were spent on each island for this purpose. Those participants selected were those who consider themselves white and whom other whites consider white as well. Hence, at least in the eyes of the researcher, their physical features are nothing more than “pure white”. Other conditions for selection included the requirement that the families of the participants should have resided in the Caribbean for more than 3 generations, and that the participants must be older than 18 years old. Although oral history might not be able to generate scientific statistical data to generalise “who is white” in Barbados and Trinidad, it will produce insights, explanations, and space for interpretation, to understand a marginalised segment of the Caribbean society, the white population.

This paper only quotes one interview from each island. The rest of the stories or information obtained

from the interviews are not quoted word by word here, but are used for analyses. This is because the paper focuses on recording the dynamics of the interviewee backgrounds as well as preliminary findings of the research. As the researcher plans to conduct more interviews on the same research topic, further findings and deeper analyses will be published in the upcoming papers.

White populations in Barbados and Trinidad are sometimes connected to the wealth and privileged status that are rooted from the colonial days^[9]. However, all the whites in two islands are not necessarily rich and powerful^[10]. An oral history allows the researcher to collect stories from seldom heard participants, and therefore provides the opportunity for the discovery of histories and experiences which have been previously misrepresented or silenced^[11]. Of course, this preliminary study does not generate any sort of theory with its small data; yet, it is believed to provide some insights on whiteness studies in the Caribbean.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Barbados

The research findings suggest that whites in Barbados are willing to speak out about their racial background, that is, you could claim that you are “white” as far as your physical features allow. Indeed, most of the participants disclosed their interracial family background, and then insist they are white, because they look white, they act white, and they belong to the white society in Barbados. Some of them agreed that even though they are considered white in Barbados, they may not be able to pass as white in Trinidad.

One young male participant, Jonathan, who moved from Trinidad to Barbados with his family, says that he was raised to be white and his whiteness was reinforced. Below is a transcript of what this young man said:

My mother was born in Trinidad to both Trinidadian parents. So before Trinidad, so they came... the French, Scottish, Africans. Ah, yeah, I can trace back to before they came to Trinidad. So like

1800s... early 1800s. because... I'm considered white here before but in other countries I might not. But it's a real weird thing, you know. It was reinforced that I was white. I was raised to be white whatever that means, with that consciousness, ah, other people said I was white and I said I was white so that makes me white. I'm white, yeah. I know because of the family history. I also know some genetic history as well on my four grandparents. So I know that I am 80% European. And 20% Indian, Native American and native Caribbean... and Arabic.

His grandparents took a genetic test, and he knows scientifically he is not “pure” white; he is mixed with French, Scottish, African, East Indian, Arabic, and Indigenous peoples. His grandparents and parents knew they were mixed. They made sure he was educated in only or predominantly white environments, and played only with white kids after school. He says that enforced his white identity.

Besides Jonathan, many participants from Barbados openly admitted they were not pure white. Actually, they knew they were mixed. One of them said one of his grandparents was “pitch black”. One of the conditions to participate in the interview was that the persons have to identify themselves as white, and other people have to identify them as white. Many of the Barbadian participants who knew they were mixed, and have photographs of non-white family members, still identified themselves as white. Then they kindly participated in the interview where the researcher asked for a European-descended white. Even though Jonathan knew he was mixed, he still identified himself as white.

Participants in Barbados say white society is divided into at least four white groups: sometimes they overlap and mingle, but they will not integrate into one big white society in Barbados where socioeconomic classes are finely layered. Those classes are divided with the levels of income and educational background, membership in traditionally white-only social clubs, such as the yacht club, religious and fraternal affiliations, family history, and most importantly skin

colour, meaning the more pure white they are, the higher their standing in white society they are likely to be. Having said that, even if they are mixed, if they have apparent white physical features, and if they have higher degrees and higher income, they could belong to the higher white society. Here, colours and classes are interweaved to judge their status.

Table 1. Interview participants in Barbados

| Barbados | Name | Sex | Age | Occupation |
|----------|----------|-----|-----|---------------------|
| 1 | Amanda | F | 32 | Marketing and Sales |
| 2 | Heather | F | 43 | Self-employment |
| 3 | Kate | F | 48 | Homemaker |
| 4 | Kimmy | F | 51 | Real Estate Agent |
| 5 | Jill | F | 64 | Self-employment |
| 6 | Maya | F | 68 | Homemaker |
| 7 | Madeline | F | 74 | * |
| 8 | Sydney | F | 76 | Retiree |
| 9 | Jonathan | M | 23 | System Engineer |
| 10 | Daniel | M | 24 | Surfer/Instructor |
| 11 | Dwayne | M | 36 | Artist |
| 12 | Wade | M | 42 | Lawyer |
| 13 | Kelvin | M | 49 | Self-employment |
| 14 | Kenneth | M | 69 | Self-employment |
| 15 | Ethan | M | 76 | Retiree |

One of the characteristics of the white societies of Barbados, is that there are disadvantaged white populations. Even if they are white, but if they are not educated or do not have good income, they will not belong to the higher white social class, and therefore not enjoy white privileges. Some say white Barbadians who occupy the highest of the social class, and the white Barbadians who occupy the bottom of the social class will never mingle. The one on the top looks down on the one at the bottom. The rich white Barbadians do not show their sympathy or empathy toward the poor white Barbadians.

The researcher had the privilege to meet two poor, white Barbadians, Kelvin and Ethan (see Table 1.), who are labelled as “red-legs”^[12]. They did not believe that white privilege or white supremacy still exists. They insist that all Barbadians are the same, regardless of their skin colour. They show no reluctance for interracial marriage or interracial children. They had the same job as other counterparts in the society,

meaning they were responsible for the same line of work with African-descended Barbadians, such as butchers and fishermen. Those two “red-leg” participants said their daughters married African-descended Barbadians, and one of their sons married a brown Dominican, and the other sons married African-descended Barbadians. They have no objection or whatsoever towards interracial marriage.

The elder generation of European-descended whites in Barbados say they do not receive preferential treatment anymore and that is ok. For them, colonial days are over, and they do not need to be treated differently. Although they do not ask for superior service just because they are white, some people try to treat them somewhat as King, and reply to them with “Sir”, instead of “man” or “yo”. In addition to this story, they say their whiteness is rather not considered something positive. Because of their whiteness, they were easily picked on and blamed for nothing. They say some non-whites think that white people receive preferential treatment, such as tax exemptions and special allowance from the government. For some of them, their whiteness is more of a disadvantage.

3.2. Trinidad

The European-descended whites in Trinidad insist on their racial purity as white. Some of the elder participants showed apparent disagreement if their daughters have interracial children. On the other hand, they say it is out of their control if their sons have interracial children out of wedlock, and they are acceptable, as they will not be part of the family. For white males, having illegitimate interracial children is one thing, but interracial marriage is another. For white females, having illegitimate, interracial children and interracial marriage will directly lead them to be cut off from the family.

The word all the white Trinidadian participants used in the interview, regardless of their age and gender, was “class”. Many of them say “class” is more important than “race”. Yet, for some of them, “class” is a synonymous term with “race”. They indicated that if their daughter wishes to marry an African man, as far as that man is of high class, meaning he must be well-educated, earn enough, and treat their daughter

like a lady, they would be ok with that. And then, they soon add their comment saying they do not think a non-white person cannot be of a high enough class to marry their daughter. In the case of their son, they noted that while they respect their son’s decision, they hope he thinks of what interracial marriage brings to his immediate family as well as his extended family. The researcher asked for clarification of this, and a straight-forward answer was not forthcoming. One of the elder respondents responded with, “Nobody wants to bring in a bad species to family.”

Table 2. Interview participants in Trinidad

| Trinidad | Name | Sex | Age | Occupation |
|----------|------------|-----|-----|-------------------|
| 1 | Nicole | F | 24 | Self-employment |
| 2 | Charlotte | F | 31 | Editor |
| 3 | Christelle | F | 36 | Public Relations |
| 4 | Carrie | F | 42 | Accountant |
| 5 | Paris | F | 47 | Real Estate Agent |
| 6 | Susan | F | 59 | Homemaker |
| 7 | Gabriella | F | 64 | Tour guide |
| 8 | Martha | F | 78 | Retiree |
| 9 | Gary | M | 29 | Graphic Artist |
| 10 | Claydon | M | 43 | Enginner |
| 11 | Timothy | M | 49 | Accountant |
| 12 | Michael | M | 58 | Self-employment |
| 13 | Paul | M | 65 | Self-employment |
| 14 | Ellis | M | 75 | Retiree |

The younger generations in Trinidad say white supremacy no longer works in Trinidad. Yet, they share stories of how well their whiteness works in their favour. For example, they admit their whiteness allows them to have an easier life, especially it makes it easier to get a better job, because people trust them just because they are white. They continued to say even if they smoke marijuana at the night club, nobody will call the police. Even the police will give white kids preferential treatment, and they will never stop white kids’ cars at a roadblock. It is therefore apparent that they take advantage of their whiteness in everyday life. Young white participants still insist they have never abused their whiteness, or never thought that they were superior, just because they are white. According to them, it is not them, but the non-white people who treat them as if they were superior to anyone.

The elder generation in Trinidad has a stronger tendency towards white supremacy. Here is an example of the narrative shared by a Trinidadian elder lady, named Martha. She is in her late 70s and lives alone in one of the gated apartments for the elderly in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Martha asked the researcher to visit her at 9:30 p.m., as she did not want anyone at the apartment to know that she was participating in a research and interviewed by a “Chinee”. The researcher accompanied Martha’s daughter, Jenna, who introduced me to Martha. The researcher had to go through great lengths to disguise herself as a delivery lady from a Chinese retail shop for this interview.

Parts of Martha’s story is as follows:

Some of the white ladies here say things like unbelievably racist comments. Sometimes saying is not enough for them... Honestly, I was living in a certain environment, and I know that makes me think black people are inferior. It is planted. That is our way of living. It does not matter if it is true or not. It really does not matter... and I think even if they are not white, they are humans too. Again, some of them treat their maids like less than animals... apparently, less than dogs. They spoil dogs, but they do not beat up their dogs, right?...

Some people still have colonial mentality. They are like ghosts. They think maids should accept anything and they can do anything to maids. On the other hand, many of them still think their employer is the absolute master and all that. They believe they cannot talk back, you know...

As you see in Martha’s words, she admits she thinks white people are superior to non-whites, and that notions were planted as she was born and raised in a certain environment, and that was her way of living. For her, it does not matter if white people are superior and non-white people are inferior, but she believes non-white people are also human and therefore deserve to be treated humanely.

Martha could have declined the researcher’s request to interview her. Yet, she insisted the researcher

interview her, as she had things to say. While she was sharing this story, as her excitement increased, she started banging on the table in front of her. What she wanted to say to the researcher was that there are elder white people who still have a strong colonial mentality, and beat up young African maids as if they were animals. Based on her story, those young African maids will not resign even if their employer beat them with a silver cane. The researcher wondered why, in the 21st century, young African ladies have to bear such inhumane punishment. Those young ladies could quit the maid jobs, or they could report the abuse to the police. According to Martha, those young ladies will not leave their jobs as maids, because they think working at white people’s houses give them credentials, because they are trusted enough to walk into white people’s houses.

The story shared above was only one of the many stories shared by white Trinidadians. The reason why the researcher chose the story above to share in this paper was because that story seems to represent the colonial notions, which is “white people are absolutely superior”, shared by many Trinidadians regardless of their age. People would fight to demolish that notion, and some would say this notion was something from the past. Nevertheless, the white Trinidadians still live with that notion, whether they like it or deny it.

4. Conclusion

This paper sets out to explore the identity of the white populations of Barbados and Trinidad, as European-descended white. This paper does not try to generalise whiteness in Barbados and Trinidad, or represent voices of all the white populations. Yet, this paper reports the findings from oral history interviews conducted with 29 participants in August 2016 and February 2017.

In Barbados, even though many of the interview participants recognise their interracial family background, they identify themselves as European-descended whites. Once their physical features are “white”, even if they are mixed, they consider themselves, and people consider them as white. They did not try to hide their interracial background. They were very open about their

background. They were not reluctant to have interracial marriages, and many of them actually have non-white spouses and interracial children. Their attachment to white hegemony is very weak, or almost non-existent. Both elder and younger generations admit white supremacy does not work in Barbados anymore, yet they still identify as European-descended whites, even though they are not pure white.

Table 3. Racial background of interview participants and their spouses (○: “pure” white, ▲: Mix, ★: African)

| | Barbaros | Sex | Age | You | Spouse |
|----------|------------|-----|-----|-----|--------|
| 1 | Amanda | F | 32 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 2 | Heather | F | 43 | ▲ | ★ |
| 3 | Kate | F | 48 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 4 | Kimmy | F | 51 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 5 | Jill | F | 64 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 6 | Maya | F | 68 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 7 | Madeline | F | 74 | ○ | ○ |
| 8 | Sydney | F | 76 | ○ | ○ |
| 9 | Jonathan | M | 23 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 10 | Daniel | M | 24 | ▲ | ★ |
| 11 | Dwayne | M | 36 | ▲ | ★ |
| 12 | Wade | M | 42 | ○ | ○ |
| 13 | Kelvin | M | 49 | ▲ | ▲ |
| 14 | Kenneth | M | 69 | ○ | ▲ |
| 15 | Ethan | M | 76 | ○ | ○ |
| Trinidad | | | | | |
| 1 | Niccole | F | 24 | ○ | ○ |
| 2 | Charlotte | F | 31 | ○ | ○ |
| 3 | Christelle | F | 36 | ○ | ○ |
| 4 | Carrie | F | 42 | ○ | ▲ |
| 5 | Paris | F | 47 | ○ | ○ |
| 6 | Susan | F | 59 | ○ | ○ |
| 7 | Gabriella | F | 62 | ○ | ○ |
| 8 | Martha | F | 78 | ○ | ○ |
| 9 | Gary | F | 29 | ○ | ▲ |
| 10 | Claydon | F | 43 | ○ | ○ |
| 11 | Timothy | F | 49 | ○ | ○ |
| 12 | Michael | F | 58 | ○ | ▲ |
| 13 | Paul | F | 65 | ○ | ○ |
| 14 | Ellis | F | 75 | ○ | ○ |

In Trinidad, all the participants consider themselves white, and they insist they were pure white, and deny any possibility of interracial family background. In Trinidad, they have to be pure white to be white. They do not hesitate to show their discomfort with interracial marriage. It is acceptable (and not able to be controlled) for white men to have interracial children, once they are illegitimate. On the other hand, it is not acceptable for white women to have interracial children, even if it is out of wedlock.

Whiteness means different things to individual whites in Trinidad. The elder generations see whiteness as representative of a superior form of racial identity, and they are proud of being white. For younger generations, whiteness signifies their negative historical roles as the oppressors and owners of the enslaved Africans as well as indentured East Indians. Therefore, the younger generations sometimes try to distance themselves from whiteness in attempt to forge closer relationships with Trinidad's non-white others.

The younger generation in both islands claim they are not racists, and that everyone is treated equally in the Caribbean, regardless of their skin colour. One young female participant from Trinidad said, "what is white in anyway?" immediately after she admitted she was pure white, and her comfort level of friendship is having a common ground, which is being white. Some young male participants say they have never thought of themselves superior to non-white others, and then that they are not racists, as they have many African-descended friends.

It is interesting to see the two types of consciousness as white: how the sense of colonial superiority is deeply rooted in the minds of the younger generations, even though they have not experienced colonial history. The other is that the younger generation tries to understate their sense of white superiority in order to assimilate into the non-white society. The younger generation denies the existence of white privileges and racism, though they retain a strong sense of their own whiteness and admit they take advantage of their whiteness in daily life.

While maintaining the concept of racial purity as white is difficult in the globalised Caribbean, colonial notions of whiteness still remain in Barbados and

Trinidad. As this paper points out the differences and similarities, and interesting realities of the whiteness in two islands, the topic of whiteness in the Caribbean is very unique. It is worthwhile to collect as much histories of whites in the Caribbean as possible, especially from the elders who have lived through the colonial era, because they reveal a great deal of valuable white people's unheard stories. As we enrich our understanding of whiteness in the Caribbean, our balanced understanding of the Caribbean will be fostered.

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