Chapter 14

In the Prison of their Skins[1]: Performing Race in Caribbean Theatre

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Introduction

This chapter is premised on the understanding that race is neither ontologically valid as a concept, nor is it useful or reliable as a term for marking difference between peoples or social groups. This position is informed by/aligns itself with other views, from that of Julian Sorrell Huxley and Alfred Cort Haddon who in 1935 suggested that 'the term race as applied to human groups should be dropped from the "'vocabulary of science' as it had lost any sharpness of meaning" (quoted in Les Back and John Solomos, 2000, 2009: 62), Robert Miles' whose neo-Marxist view is that race is a socio-political construct, "an ideological effect, a mask that hides real economic relationships" (Miles, 1984 in Back and Solomos, 2009: 7) and often deployed as an instrument for social regulation, to then American President, Bill Clinton, who in 2000 while receiving the final Report on the Human Genome Project quoted the genomics researchers' unanimous conclusion that there is no race in our genes, that human beings are the same everywhere. (cited by Sandra Soo-Jin Lee in Karim Murji and John Solomos eds. 2015: 26). However, although it is now generally accepted within scholarship and other 'informed' social and political spaces and contexts that 'race' is a problematic ideologically constructed term for marking difference, it is also true that it has real material effects because, according to Robert Miles (1982: 42), its reality as a tool for analysis as well as an impetus for human behaviours and actions. Nowhere is this affective materiality of race more evident than in the lived realities of the characters from the three Caribbean plays selected for analysis in this chapter,

Dream on Monkey Mountain by Derek Walcott (first performed 1967 and published 1970) from St Lucia, *An Echo in the Bone* by Dennis Scott (first performed 1974 and published 1985) and *Old Story Time* by Trevor Rhone (first performed 1979 and published 1987), both from Jamaica.

An important question which this chapter would like to explore is why it is that despite its porousness and its unreliability, race is still used in constructions and demarcations of identity by many individuals and social groups; and allied to this, why it is that the word black or white or yellow bring forth certain associations in the minds of those who the terms are mentioned to or used to designate. The chapter intends to explore this in the context of Caribbean society, especially through its theatre. I have chosen to do this because the Caribbean is one of those few areas in the world where colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery played a significant role in their founding; and trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism were also the two historical events in which race, both as an idea and a practice of human relations, was very much in evidence. The characters in the selected plays, black, white and mixed or "brown" (as Mama/Miss Aggy, one of the major characters in *Old Story Time* designates Margaret, the mixed-race girl she wanted her son, Len, to marry), demonstrate the racialised nature of Caribbean societies which the characters live in and which the plays explore. The reality is that while there are claims that race no longer is the key determinant of the social structure and thus of human relationships in the Caribbean, the same slave, colonial and imperial notion of race still influences people's lives, often determining where individuals find themselves on the social ladder. One therefore can state categorically that race still determines where and what kind of lives people live in the Caribbean. As John Thieme (2007) points out in his essay on Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*, in the

> "the era in which Walcott and Dennis Scott, were coming of age, slavery remained *the* unspoken *Ur*-narrative of Afro-Caribbean life, as well as a crucial sub-text underlying the experience of Caribbean peoples of other ethnicities…" (p, 5).

It is in fact difficult to see how the experience of slavery can ever be exorcised from the collective unconscious of Caribbean peoples, especially those of African descent for whom the negative impact of slavery seemed to have been greater. Thus although Walcott, Scott and Rhone wrote their plays in the late sixties and seventies, immediately after the Caribbean countries achieved political independence from their former European colonial and slave masters – events which unsurprisingly elicited widespread optimism that total freedom from the socio-political effects of their slave past would follow for the descendants of the formerly enslaved Africans - evidence unfortunately suggest that this has not been the case and that the early euphoria and hope have since gone and the long tentacles of their slave past are still present in much of contemporary Caribbean society. Even plays written decades after this immediate post-independence period confirm that the plight of a majority of peoples of African descent have not changed significantly from what it was when Walcott, Scott, Rhone and their contemporaries wrote their plays.

One needs to state from the outset that although the term race will be used in the chapter, it is important to restate/indicate a positioning from above that recognises the problematic, contested nature and therefore inadequacy of the term as a marker of human difference, a standpoint that was also strongly indicated in the introductory chapter to the book. But having said this, the chapter unfortunately acknowledges that for many, especially peoples of African descent who globally have disproportionately

been at the rough end of consequences of racist behaviour by and treatment from the white European Other, as are some of the characters in the plays, race remains a lived reality in contexts in which although they constitute a majority population in the Caribbean, they remain the poor, oppressed and marginalised.

The colonial and slave history of the Caribbean was a deeply impactful fact of life, and the imprint of this history is still seen and felt coursing through the different strata of society. The Caribbean islands are made up approximately by seventy percent of peoples of African descent who are the descendants of previously enslaved Africans who were forcibly brought to the Caribbean to provide labour for the plantations – in fact, peoples of African descent represent the majority group in most English speaking former colonies in the Caribbean with Jamaica actually having close to ninety-five percent of its population having some degree of African ancestry (Rex Nettleford, 1978). The remainder of the Caribbean population - approximately 20-25 percent - is made up of peoples of European descent (that is the descendants of the former enslavers/plantation owners and those of Asian descent (descended from the indentured servants and labourers). Given, as pointed out earlier, that theories and the deployment of the term race was mainly a colonial and imperial strategy used to differentiate between coloniser and colonised and between slave owners and the enslaved, it is not surprising that race played a major role in the social, political and economic organisation of the Caribbean colonial and slave society. Thus Caribbean society was and in many ways still is a perfect illustration of the fact stated above that although the idea of race is a myth, yet it is a myth which has real physically and psychologically felt effects on the lives of many who had to live under its surreptitious purview as we will shortly see in the plays.

The social structure left behind across most parts of the New World, and the Caribbean in particular, when trans-Atlantic slavery ended was one that graded and to a large extent still continues to grade people up along the social ladder from black, through brown to white. According to Elsa Goveia, Caribbean peoples, 'belong to a universe in which it is accepted that the upper class should be people of white or lighter complexion as the lower class should be people of dark complexion. (Goveia, 1970: 10). There is evidence though that suggest that it was not always the case that there was this strict hierarchy among the many groups that made up Caribbean society at the onset of trans-Atlantic slavery, or that Africans were perceived as inferior or placed lowest in the social scale. As revealed by Gunnar Mydral in "Racial Beliefs in America":

> When the Negro was first enslaved, his subjugation was not justified in terms of his biological inferiority…. The historical literature on this early period also records that the imported Negroes – and the captured Indians – originally were kept in much the same status as the white indentured servants. (in Back and Solomos, 2000, 2009: 112)

But as already pointed out, race only came into reckoning as part of the attempt by ideologues of the imperial, colonial and trans-Atlantic enslavement enterprise to justify the two practices. The slave system was not new to Africans, and slaves were first and foremost seen and treated as human beings, unfortunate maybe to be slaves. It is well-known that slaves in Africa could buy themselves out of slavery after a while and so the state of being a slave in some instances was temporary, with some notable former slaves buying their freedom and later rising to become leaders in the societies in which they had been previously enslaved. Moreover, when European slave traders first arrived on the West African coasts, because they needed partners to trade with or to supply them with their human cargo, they recognised and accorded respect to the chiefs and factors who controlled all coastal trade. The key point to note however is that Europeans came to Africa for slaves because it was cheap and the African slaves were good

workers who could endure the harsh conditions of the plantations. The idea of Africans and black people as belonging to an inferior race was therefore a later invention which, as I have argued elsewhere, was used to justify the inhuman treatment and the denial of rights that the enslaved Africans received from European slave owners in the New World. (see Okagbue, 2009: 1-18).

Porous and spurious as it is, this introduction of a discriminatory racial element into the relationship between Africans and Europeans in the Caribbean has had a deep and long lasting effect on the social structure of Caribbean societies as Goveia highlighted above. It is hardly surprising that as a result of this pervasiveness of race as a basis for social placement, that it also plays a significant, and in fact a defining role in perceptions and constructions of identity by many people in the Caribbean. Race had underpinned social organisation and relations during the era of slavery in the Caribbean and unfortunately, it continues to do so in contemporary post-slavery and postcolonial Caribbean society; there is abundant evidence of this in Caribbean plays as we shall see later in the chapter. With this experience of race as a major factor in the way people lived, were treated and as it continues to determine placement and treatment and life experiences, one is not surprised that it also affects very much how people perceive themselves in relation to themselves and to others. In comparing identity formations in African and Caribbean theatres, I suggested that whereas African characters tended to identify themselves along class lines – those who have and those who do not have, "identities in the Caribbean are based more on racial origins than they are on class affiliations or belonging – people perceive themselves as their 'race' as opposed to their class'. (Okagbue, 2009: 88) Thus, many Caribbean plays explore the theme of self and of survival in an environment in which that sense of self is seriously in question. Most of the characters in much of Caribbean theatre seem to be in a struggle to see to what

extent they are able to rise above the limitations imposed on them by the colour of their skin and racial origins. We will see how these are the key concerns in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *An Echo in the Bone* and *Old Story Time*.

Caribbean Theatre and its Social Context

According to Maria Shevtsova (1993: ix), 'no matter where it is constructed, the theatre vibrates with the movements of its society'. This means that theatre, wherever and in whatever form it exists and in whichever context it is produced, it always captures and resonates with the internal rhythms as well as the physical/material dimensions, processes and reality of that context. Theatre, therefore, does not lie as it is a good barometer for accessing the pulse and dynamics of the society out of which it has emerged. As we will see in discussing the selected plays, the theatre in its dialectical and mutually affective relationship with society, acts as a repository of the history, culture, memory and social processes of its context; Victor Turner (1990: 8-18) sees this as the theatre acting as a 'cultural-aesthetic mirror' that affords society the opportunity for self-reflexivity, and a platform within/on which 'the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action" as they shape and explain behaviour'(p, 1). Caribbean theatre is no different, and in fact in the view of this chapter, Caribbean plays perform this function quite well as they more than any artistic or historical representation of and from the islands that make up this geographical place, are able to capture as well as reflect the deep imprints of Caribbean racial and cultural history.

Caribbean society during the period of plantation slavery was one in which the line between slave and master was drawn along racial lines; the slaves were peoples of

African descent and the masters were mainly peoples of European descent; the slaves were 'black' while the masters were 'white'. There were of course the native Indians, mixed-race (mulattoes), European and later Asian indentured workers/servants. As I have pointed out, Europeans did not introduce slavery into the African continent:

> Slavery as an institution was not new to Africans, what was new and different was the treatment given to the slaves. The slave in Africa was never seen as an inferior person in any way; unlucky maybe, but never the non-human that he/she became in the New World. In the Caribbean and the Americas, he/she lacked the humanity which would have linked him/her to the master thereby making the inhuman treatment received from the latter unacceptable… (Okagbue, 2009: 10)

However, of significance to the theme of this chapter, is that trans-Atlantic slavery signalled the onset of the uprooting, subsequent humiliation and ultimately, the collective alienation of peoples of African descent in the Caribbean. Having been forcibly removed from their ancestral homes in Africa and thrown into a bewildering and often physically and emotionally hostile plantation environment of the New World entirely dominated by European slave masters, the enslaved Africans became aware for the first time of their blackness. But not only that, they also realised that the terrible life and experiences which they faced in the New World was because of the colour of their skin (Okagbue, 2009, p, 21) as the European enslavers seemed bent on de-culturising and emasculating them to the point of denying them the rights to their cultures, their names and languages.

So, in order to justify the enslavement of Africans and the inhuman treatment meted out to them, myths of African barbarity, savagery, atavism, bestiality and primitivism were created and pervasively circulated to present trans-Atlantic enslavement as an act

of saving or elevating Africans from these horrible and low conditions of existence. Thus, although African and Europeans had traded freely as equal partners on the African coasts before the trans-Atlantic slave trade began, but once the trade started and progressed, the racial myths of denigration were created and deployed by European enslavers and their imperial backers, not only to justify the inhuman trade, but also to maximise their economic profit as making the slave non-human meant that they could not expect to be paid a human wage for their labour.

This binary that balanced the superiority of white people against the inferiority of black people had significant implications, not only in the ordering of Caribbean society but actually in the constructions of identities by the various peoples of the Caribbean. In relation to the latter, unfortunately, the racist myths used to underpin trans-Atlantic slavery did have an effect on the enslaved Africans; it did resonate in them after a sustained period of time and use. As Albert Memmi (1974) surmises in his portraits of the colonizer and colonized, what is surprising about the negative portrait of the colonized is the,

> … echo that it excites in the colonized himself. Constantly confronted with this image of himself, set forth and imposed on all institutions and in every human act, how could the colonized help reacting to his portrait?... Wilfully created and spread by the colonizer, the mythical and degrading portrait ends up being accepted and lived with to an extent by the colonized. It thus acquires a certain amount of reality and contributes to the true portrait of the colonized. (p, 87)

The enslaved Africans could only think of their 'race' whenever they thought of themselves because it was the only reality they had because of its materiality in their lives; every experience of theirs in the New World was impacted upon by the colour of their skins – the treatment they received, their placement on the social ladder, and their relationships with the other social groups with whom they shared their environment.

However, in spite of the concerted and sustained effort of the enslavers to deprive the enslaved Africans of their cultures and the worlds and practices embodied by these cultures, that they were able to cling on to some elements of their different African cultures was, as Emmanuel Obiechina (1986: 101-60) argues in his essay, "Africa in the Souls of Dispersed Children…", a testament to their indomitable wills which refused to die in the face of the relentless and merciless onslaught from their enslavers. This indestructible will to survive and protect their culture has remained and is a major factor in articulations and contestations of race and culture politics in the Caribbean. It also explains as we shall see later on why race remains a major consideration and theme in Caribbean life, literature and theatre.

Race and Place in Caribbean Theatre/In the Prison of their Skin

Although colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery have both ended a long time ago - for slavery about a century and half ago, and more than half a century for colonisation - the racism which they engendered remain a lived reality for the descendants of the formerly enslaved Africans in the New World. There is no doubt that race played and continues to play a part in social placement in Caribbean society and thus has a significant impact on identity formation in the Caribbean; and the characters in the three selected plays demonstrate the full extent of this importance as they represent the different ways in which different peoples in the Caribbean see themselves and how that perception affects the way they live and the way they interact with other people, both within their putative racial group and those from outside it.

In general, being black in the Caribbean means being poor, disenfranchised, and often having to struggle and work hard to escape or rise above the limitations placed on the individual by belonging to this racial category; conversely, being white very often

guarantees a higher placement on the ladder with attendant resources and privileges. One area in which there is a continuation of the socio-economic structures from the slave period is in matters of land rights, a theme which Scott explores in *An Echo in the Bone* as we shall see later; this we see is also the theme of David Edgecombe's *Kirnon's Kingdom*, a play written decades later in 2001. Although written twenty-seven years apart, both plays deal with the issue of ownership and usage of land. In Scott's play, Crew, as a descendant of a formerly enslaved African, has a tiny piece of land which borders the large expanse owned by Master Charles, the descendant of a former European slave owner. Although Crew owns this land, he unfortunately is not allowed to use it as freely as he wished because of Master Charles' desire to either force him out or compel Rachel, the former's wife to come work as his servant in the Great House. While in Edgecombe's play, Harold Kirnon, an African descendant of slaves, is a sharecropper on a vast cotton estate owned by Mas James. In his own case, the lack of right to land actually means a lack of the right to participate in the political process as one cannot vote if one does not own land. Thus the play highlights the failure of an equitable distribution of land after emancipation and political independence many decades later. Thus, although Kirnon and his family sow and tend the cotton, they have no rights over the product of their labour, just as their slave ancestors. Therefore, being black and poor sits in sharp contrast to being white and privileged, with the mixed and other 'races' in between, just as it had been during the period of enslavement and colonisation. This sharply contrasting positions in society are amply demonstrated in many of the plays in Caribbean theatre.

Because race was and still is a major factor in Caribbean social arrangement, and because race also plays a central role in identity formation for many people in the islands, the issue of race is a recurring theme in Caribbean plays. Two

attitudes/responses to race can be identified in the three selected plays; the first is the attempt by characters to escape the limitations of race and the second is confronting and overcoming race. Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a play whose central character, Makak, represents a good example of an individual of African descent who, having for a long time endured the deprivation, denigration and indignities which his Caribbean society meted out to him on account of his racial origin decides to escape and make a return to Africa, a former homeland where it is revealed in his dream that he was descended from a line of kings and great peoples. The mental journey which Makak eventually makes is also for the mixed-race policeman, Corporal Lestrade, who hates himself intensely for being partly black and thus rejects his African/black identity. However, Lestrade's alienation is made worse by that fact that although he rejects his African self, his white European side does not accept him either, so he occupies an in-between space of identity of being neither black nor white.

As is often the case in Caribbean plays and literature in general, one way race is explored is through the theme of characters who embark on a quest to understand the self and their position in society, and Makak and Lestrade with their companions, Tigre and Souris, undertake such a quest in the play; the group of black characters in *An Echo in the Bone* make a similar mental journey during the Nine-night ritual wake for the dead Crew. Mama in *Old Story Time* without embarking on any journey is also forced to confront her anti-black prejudices which had made her treat her son, Len and his wife, Lois, the way she did. *Dream on Monkey Mountain* opens with Makak in jail overnight for disorderly behaviour; and while in jail he meets two other black habitual criminals, Tigre and Souris, and all three prisoners are being guarded by Corporal Lestrade. Prior to his time in jail, Makak had been having deep psychological problems arising from his perception of himself because of his being a black man of African

descent in the Caribbean – he sees himself as ugly, socially marginalised and lives as a recluse on Monkey Mountain with only Moustique, his business partner, as his only friend. Makak feels so alienated and negative about who he is that he would not look at himself in the mirror for fear of being confronted by the image of "…this old man, ugly as sin". He tells Tigre, Souris and Corporal Lestrade:

> Sirs, I am sixty years old. I have lived all my life
> Like a wild beast in hiding. Without child, without wife.
> People forget me like the mist on Monkey Mountain
> Is thirty years now I have look in no mirror,
> Not a pool of cold water, when I must drink,
> I stir my hands first, to break up my image. (Walcott, 1970: 226-227)

But to compound his problem of racial alienation and self-hate, he lusts after a White Apparition or the famed Daemon Woman of Caribbean mythology – in the play she is represented by a white mask which Makak uses to act out his race fantasies - who appears to him in his dream to tell him that he is not that ugly. The irony however is that the appearance of this woman actually reinforces the depth of his ugliness for him because he knows, as does the audience, that she is unattainable. As Corporal Lestrade reminds him in the centre of the forest when Makak is made to pronounce judgement on her, together with other well-known white characters from history who stand accused of race crimes against black people:

> She, she? What you beheld, my prince, was but an image of your longing. As inaccessible as snow, as fatal as leprosy…. She is the wife of the devil, the white witch, she is the mirror of the moon that this ape look into and find himself unbearable. She is all that is pure, all that he cannot reach…. She is lime, snow, marble, moonlight, lilies, cloud, foam and bleaching cream, the mother of civilization, and the confounder of blackness…. She is the white light that paralysed your mind, that led you into this confusion. (Walcott, 1970: 318-319)

Walcott, in my view, is advocating two things in the play. The first is that Makak's longing to physically return and claim his African ancestry and Lestrade's initial claim to whiteness and subsequent extreme advocacy of his black identity, are just dreams which are as futile as the former's desire for 'racial improvement' through love and acceptance by the white daemon woman and the latter's paranoid and vigorous rejection of his African identity through his enforcement of 'white law'; both courses of action or state of being, the play argues, provide no solution to the racial problem faced by the black person in the Caribbean. The second is that the desire to pay homage to Africa is necessary, but should not be an end in itself. The play's message seems to be that the feelings of inferiority and self-deprecation of characters like Makak, Souris and Tigre or of superiority at first and later inferiority and confusion of the mixed-race Lestrade, are products of their imaginations which they have to exorcise in order to come to terms with their true African-Caribbean identity.

As Walcott (1974) writes "[i]n the subconscious there is a black Atlantis buried in a sea of sand" (1974, 1998: 58). Each person or character has to search for this Africa in their souls, either as individuals or as a collective. Makak manages to get the other characters to undertake this journey of cultural retrieval with him. It is significant that the two central characters at the conclusion of the meeting in the forest, find themselves. Makak exorcises the debilitating hold of the white apparition who had held him captive, by chopping off her head, and Lestrade is able to "achieve self-knowledge and to discover his identity by going into his subconscious. This is the only way he can discover the beautiful depth of his blackness". (Ginette Curry (2007: 219) It is therefore not by accident that Lestrade calls Makak "old father" and later "grandfather" in that final scene when he comes to accept his "cultural and racial identity" (Okagbue, 2009: 36) and significantly too Makak responds: "Now he is one of us…. They reject half of

you. We accept all" (Walcott, 1970: 299-300). The same can be said of the group of African-Caribbean characters who ultimately discover themselves and answers to their slave past through the wake in honour of Crew in *An Echo in the Bone*.

Scott's play is set in an old sugar barn behind Crew's cottage in the present, nine nights after the killing of the white estate owner, Master Charles and the disappearance of Crew himself; the latter is suspected of having carried out the killing. Crew's wife, Rachel, has organised a Nine-Night ritual ceremony to commemorate her dead husband; but in reality this a device by the dramatist to enable the African Caribbean characters to get to the bottom of what had transpired between Crew and Master Charles that led to the killing. During the ritual Crew's first son, Sonson, becomes possessed by the spirit of his father, and through him racial memory is evoked and all of them are able to go back in time to experience the entire history of black people in the Caribbean and their oppressive experiences as slaves in their relationship with white slave owners over the centuries. The action of the play effortlessly traverses time and space, enabling the playwright to present contrasting facets of African-Caribbean history; and through this mechanism the racial tensions that have always coloured the relationship between black and white people are graphically essayed and conclusions reached about the rightness or wrongness of Crew's action.

The setting of *An Echo in the Bone* recreates the social structure of Caribbean society during the slave era in terms of social space and place for the various groups, and Caribbean society now, in terms of ownership and control of material resources. In the play, Master Charles is the only white character but he disproportionately owns and controls most of the land and therefore the economy of the place as it were, while the other characters who are all black live on the margins of his large estate and make do with whatever little he allows to trickle down to them. This is what was pointed out at

the beginning that although race is imperfect and intellectually imagined, but that it still affects people on a daily basis in the Caribbean as the position of Crew, his family and their friends and neighbours who are of African-Caribbean descent illustrate. The underlying story of the play is that Crew, an ex-slave or a descendant of slaves, has a small piece of land which he had inherited and which for him is a symbol that he is no longer a slave. However, his land borders the expansive holding of Master Charles, who for some reason as it emerges during the trance sequence had diverted the water flow away from Crew's land thereby rendering it useless for him. Crew, a very proud man, humbles himself and goes to the Great House to beg Master Charles to allow the water back through his farm, but instead of helping him out as requested, Master Charles pushes Crew down the steps in an attempt to humiliate him further. Of course, Crew loses his temper and strikes out with his machete at Master Charles, killing him in the process. Realising what he had done and not wishing to be tried and hanged for what he considers a provoked act of self-defence and justified retaliation for an injustice on his person, Crew runs away and later takes his own life.

Like *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *An Echo in the Bone* also explores a psychic journey that takes the black characters who are in the barn to participate in the wake for Crew back to the beginnings of African-Caribbean history; and like similar plays by Caribbean dramatists of African descent, the journey inevitably leads back to trans-Atlantic slavery. It is a journey into the communal psyche and racial memory of African-Caribbean peoples, which is where their Caribbean history, as Walcott says, began: 'For us in the archipelago the real memory is salted with the memory of migration… [the] degraded arrival [which] must be seen as the beginning, not the end of our history'. ("The Muse of History", 1974, 1998: 41)

All black people in the Caribbean are products of the slave encounter between Africa and Europe and thus, deeply etched in the collective and individual unconscious of every Caribbean person of African descent is "the painful memory of the 'middle passage' and any excursion into the self inevitably brings the individual face to face with this racial scar". (Okagbue, 2009: 36) At the heart of the narrative in *An Echo in the Bone* is, on the part of a majority of the black characters, a deep sense of cultural and racial origins, so an awareness of racial and cultural roots and the implications arising therefrom is an underlying theme; "it underpins the conflict between Crew and Mr Charles, his oppressor and descendant of the slave master". (Okagbue, 2009: 37) Every African-Caribbean person in search for identity, for roots and routes, almost always ends up with that archetypal image of the slave being ground down by the oppressive sugar cane farms and mills of the plantations, and this image/scene is graphically played out for the reader/audience in *An Echo in the Bone*. The play unfolds as a series of scenes which on the surface are disconnected, but which by the time the last scene/episode unravels reveal the racial history and rage which drove Crew to kill Master Charles. At that moment in the play when the white man pushes the begging black man down the steps – the action freezes – that image is designed to recall centuries of maltreatment and hurt which black people had suffered in the hands of white people in the Caribbean. The effect of this freezing is that it completely transforms Crew's individual act of murder into a collective rising up by black people to take revenge on Master Charles who also becomes a representative of his own people/race. The confrontation between them is transformed into the archetypal confrontation between black and white, between slave and master. The play's final message seems to be to remind the reader/audience of African-Caribbean peoples of

the need for them to recover and repossess their racial pride which will enable them to reclaim and repair their humanity that had been bruised and battered by their colonial and slave experiences.

The final play to be discussed in the chapter is Rhone's theatrically experimental play, *Old Story Time*. Unlike the two previous plays discussed, *Old Story Time* centres specifically on contemporary Caribbean life, and in particular, experiences of the highly racialised relationships which still exist in the society. On the surface, there appears to be a change in the social structure reflecting instances of upward social mobility among black people arising from educational achievement by some of the characters; this is a situation that is completely absent from the other two plays. However, in spite of this, the fact remains that a majority of the black characters in *Old Story Time* occupy a lower position relative to the few white characters who by contrast are at the top. It is worthy of note that in a play with eight main characters – Len, his wife Lois, his mother, Mama (Miss Aggy), Pa Ben (the narrator), Pearl, George, Margaret and Estate Developer – George and probably Margaret and the Estate Developer are the non-black characters but they are at the top in terms of their financial standing and social status. Len is highly placed because of his high educational achievement – he is the most educated character in the play; whereas his mother Mama and Pa Ben are poor and on the lower scale with Pearl because they are black, and also because the first two being of the older generation blacks who did not have the opportunity to improve themselves through education as Len and Lois had been able to do; Lois also joins the upper class because of her marriage to Len and because prior to her meeting and marrying Len, she had been one of the very few blacks to have been offered a decent job as a teller in a bank. George, who was her manager at the time, reminds her of how newsworthy and ground-breaking it had been

then for a black person to have been offered a job in a bank. Although it still did not stop him from looking down on her as a person.

However, of more significance in relation to the theme of the chapter is the perceived and lived attitude to race by the characters. For Len, being black does not seem to have posed any problems for him in the long run, although that is not to say that the racism that being black attracts had not touched him; after all, he was roundly humiliated by George and his racist friends because he had stupidly sent a love letter to the beautiful mixed-race Miss Margaret who eventually became George's wife. Pa Ben and Pearl seem also to be comfortable in their skin and 'racial' background whereas for Mama, being black is a different matter altogether and is a condition she has struggled with for a long time. Mama belongs to a group of black characters (the group includes Lestrade and his famous speech in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and many others from other Caribbean plays by dramatists of African descent) who have a problem with their race because they bought into the pervasive imperialist and colonial theory of the "evolutionary backwardness of black peoples". (Okagbue, 2009: 47) These characters are almost always running away from themselves, escaping the shadow of their skin colour.

Mama believes strongly and accepts this notion of 'negro' inferiority to the point that she beats Len mercilessly when she catches him playing with Pearl, a "little dutty black gal" when she ideally wants him to befriend and marry Miss Margaret, "a nice brown girl with hair down her back". Her deeply ingrained negative perception of self, accompanied by a deep-seated hatred for blackness leads her to yearn for her son to improve himself and the family line by marrying a fair-skinned woman, govern everything she does in the play. But irrational as her behaviour may seem to others, for her what she is doing is the right thing, and when her friend and close confidante Pa Ben

reminds her that Len's father was black and suggests that the boy perhaps had married Lois because he wanted a wife who looked like his own mother, she replies:

> Mama: Black was good enough for me. It not good enough for him. There was better for him (*To herself*) What happen to Miss Margaret?
> Pa Ben: The boy make him own choice
> Mama: What happen to Miss Margaret? (*She continues bemoaning the loss of Miss Margaret*)
> (Rhone, 1981: 23)

Mama hates herself as a black person and because of that, and like Makak in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, she idealises white people, trusts them and values their judgements above that of black people – this may be why it took her so long to accept that George was, in fact, a fraudster who had conned her out of her savings; however, she also, unlike Makak, hates other black people and in the play she sees them, black women in particular (first Pearl and later Lois), as threats or obstacles to her dream of seeing her son progress and improve his lot by marrying a white or fair-skinned woman. Mama shares with Makak and Lestrade a desire to lose themselves in 'a white mist' which they see as a way out of their racial predicament. Other characters of African descent in the play, in their different ways, try to point out to Mama the foolishness and wrongness of her attitude to her culture and racial origins. But it is not until the end when his duplicitous nature is revealed to her that she realises that George was 'the evil wretch' who had persecuted her son to the point of forcing him to run away from school and that it was Lois and her dead father who were the good Samaritans that took him in and cared for and persuaded him to go back to school and complete his education.

Another character whose attitude to race in the play is worth noting is George. He plays the typical racist from the colonial and imperial script. He knows his 'nigger' who, in his view, is of limited intelligence, emotionally immature and so can be easily

handled or swindled as in the case of his dealings with Mama. For George, Mama was just a foolish old black lady who could easily be separated from her money; the latter, because of her disposition and thoughts about race is the perfect foil for that scenario to play out. And George's history with Len while they were at school showed how racist and full of himself he was and apparently still is. The full extent of his racism is explained by Pa Ben's bitterness while watching George haughtily strut about in his riding gear while ordering and racially abusing Len:

> George: [*On buggy riding away*] Giddy up
> Pa Ben: You should see them, just sneering down on the world, them head way up in the sky, drunk with power and authority…
>
> [George *struts around still dressed in his finery.*]
>
> George: Here, boy. [Len *hesitates*] On the double, boy. Move! [Len *hurries*] Clean my shoes, burnish it till you see you big black ugly face in it, boy! [*Len goes on all fours and starts to polish* George's shoe. George *is enjoying himself immensely. He uses* Len's *back as a foot-rest for his free foot, his riding crop poised over* Len's *backside*.] And boy, don't forget we need you for the Easter play. We have you down for three part – Judas Iscariot, one of the thieves, and both ends of the donkey. Ha, ha, ha! [*He straddles* Len, *riding and whipping him*.] (Rhone, 49-50)

Even when he was in trouble having been caught out in his fraudulent scheme and he had come seeking to get assistance from Len, he is still condescending in his attitude to Len, trying to pull the wool over the latter's eyes with false and over-inflated figures which he thought Len was not going to spot. But Len had soused him out and was in fact out to expose him for what he had done to his mother with his bogus housing scheme. He and his friends had been so incensed that Len had the nerve to send Margaret a love letter; she at the time was George's girlfriend, and they beat the hell out of him to teach him a lesson not to aspire to a relationship with a fair skinned girl. They also made fun of Mama on one occasion when she visited Len in school and

brought him food. Thus George's overall attitude is that blacks and whites should not intermix; in fact, he believes that it was a mistake to give out scholarships which enabled a poor black boy like Len to attend such a privileged school as they were attending. Moreover, George also feels that admitting black people to his former school was negatively affecting the educational and sporting standards of the school. However, one suspects that subconsciously this attitude arises from a fear of the social mobility which such access to quality education as is available to white people would lead to, with Len's success and social rise a case in point.

Conclusion

The three plays looked at in this chapter illustrate the fact that although, as the essay argues, race is a social construct that pretends to be based on a biological/scientific truth, that unfortunately in the context of their Caribbean setting, it has considerable material effect on the lives of people of all races. Caribbean society, built as it was on a foundation of colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery, operated a racial ideology in which a majority of the population who were of African descent were enslaved and because of that occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder, while a minority who were Europeans and slave masters occupied the highest rung. Colonialism needed this social ordering to make it work and be profitable as well. Thus a concept of race in which superficial biological differences, such as skin colour and texture of hair, were used to construct ideas about difference that assigned arbitrary values to black, white, yellow and other colours. However, in all this, the most significant was the binary opposition that became established between black and white; black was inferior, white superior, black was primitive while white was civilised etc. This ultimately became the measure used to justify the maltreatment and harsh inhuman conditions under which

enslaved Africans and their descendants lived in the plantations and have continued to do so afterwards.

What the plays demonstrate is that although slavery and colonialism ended, the social structure left in their wake is still visible/operational today, both in the placement of people on the social ladder and the nature of the relationship between the various peoples of the Caribbean. The plays reveal that Caribbean society retains a structure in which a majority of people who are black are poor and at the bottom just as in the days of slavery and during colonial times, while a majority of those who are rich are white or are of fairer skin. The plays also reveal that the practice of keeping the races apart is still very much intact, with, in the main, black people living with black people and white people living with white people, and the other groups locked in their separate locations or sides of towns. Makak in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* longs for a white woman but he was not likely to get her; Mama in *Old Story Time* hoped that her son, Len, would marry Miss Margaret, but as we saw, this crossing of racial boundary/barrier was anathema to George and his friends; and Master Charles in *An Echo in the Bone* lives alone in the Great House and only allows blacks like Rachel, Crew and others to come to serve his needs and return to their hovels on the margins of his huge estate. This all goes to show that the idea of race is very alive in the Caribbean, contrary to claims otherwise by the politicians and the tourist industry.

Finally, what the plays also reveal is that racist thinking exists on all sides. It is particularly pertinent to point out that in the representation of characters, there appears to be racism against white characters at two levels, by characters and by the dramatists. There, for instance, appears to be a form of silencing of the white characters by both the dramatists and the characters, apart from George in *Old Story Time* (Miss Margaret and Estate Developer are mentioned by other characters in flashback scenes, but never

make a physical appearance), and thus representations of white characters are from the perspective of black characters. So all these representations are just constructions of whiteness by blackness. A good case in point being Master Charles in *An Echo in the Bone* who never appears in his own right but is represented by one of the black characters during Sonson's period of possession. Similarly, no white character really is presented in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, rather the impression of a whiteness is given by the mask of the White Apparition which Makak has created and plays with. Thus throughout the plays, and this is true of other plays in Caribbean theatre, there is no real voice of whiteness in the plays; rather what there is, is how blacks see whites through the purported behaviour of whites towards blacks.

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[1] This title makes a nod to George Lamming's influential novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* which was published in 1953.