Henrice Altink, *Public Secrets: Race and Colour in Colonial and Independent Jamaica*.

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In this superb book, Henrice Altink takes on an enduring paradox at the core of Jamaican society: the fact that distinctions of “race” and color exert powerful influence across much of the twentieth century even as they are resolutely denied. *Public Secrets* assembles copious evidence demonstrating the presence and disadvantageous effects of these coexisting ideological truths hiding in plain view in this majority-Black society, and deftly unmask the rhetorical dodges and suppressive measures by which Jamaicans participate in displacing them.

Altink sifts through evidence from an impressive array of sources, including Jamaican census data and other socioeconomic survey material collected by local and international agencies, newspaper reports, social scientific studies, interviews, memoirs, novels, nonfiction essays, and blogposts. Her introduction sets out the study’s theoretical framework and compares the Jamaican case to neighboring Latin American and Caribbean societies. Four substantive chapters then examine key areas of Jamaican life. Chapter 1 discusses the struggle against racial barriers to employment and promotion in the public and private sectors and the biases and impediments that continue despite the gains achieved. Chapter 2 reveals how the educational system—the focus of social reform and pathway to upward mobility—has also been a critical institutional context for reproducing race and color distinctions, favoring lighter-skinned and better-off students and deeply affecting children’s formative sense of self. Chapter 3 shows how Jamaicans are socialized into the nuanced significances of race and color as well as the informal modes of physical and social segregation operating in private and semipublic spheres. Chapter 4 examines the disproportionate denial of full legal, political, and civil rights experienced by dark-skinned Jamaicans both before and after independence, notwithstanding the changing racial composition of the institutions of governance and an absence of *de jure* discrimination. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the book’s argument, traces the ongoing significance of race/color in present-day Jamaica, and suggests ways in which disparities might be routinely measured, monitored, and publicized to increase awareness, discussion, and change.

Public Secrets uses various strategies to undermine Jamaicans’ entrenched ideology of evasion and disavowal. For example, Altink organizes her argument around deceptively straightforward chronological periods: 1918–43, 1944–61, and 1962–80, pointing to continuities and change across the decades. More artful than it appears, this narrative technique allows her effectively to challenge Jamaicans’ firmly held nationalist convictions that the attainment of political

sovereignty marked a watershed shift in the impediments historically imposed on Blackness. Similarly, by treating colorism as a vital though neglected form of racial discrimination—showing how “Brownness” (like Whiteness) attracts differential treatment, accrues privilege, and allows for the accumulation of social capital—Altink challenges Jamaicans’ tendency to think of race and racism largely in binary terms thereby reinforcing their sense of Jamaica’s racial exceptionalism. Moreover, by attending to the euphemisms, ellipses, and other dodges Jamaicans have developed to talk about race while appearing not to—“home environment,” “good taste and manners,” “home training”—she compels readers to reflect on the work performed by these commonplace rhetorical strategies.

The analysis draws on theoretical advances from the social sciences and gender, race and cultural studies, insightfully applying them to the Jamaican context. Introducing the concepts of cultural, symbolic, and social capital, Altink demonstrates how identifiable proxies for race become conduits to privilege. A plethora of less overt characteristics are continuously brought into play to secure or thwart social advantage even after race-neutral or merit-based policies have been instituted to ensure equality of opportunity. The idea that race-neutral policies can still have *racial effects*, and that those charged with administering them do not readily set aside their own backgrounds and biases, are conclusions that the study makes difficult to dismiss. Moreover, advantages gained in previous generations—based not only on wealth but, for example, on light or brown skin color and private preparatory schooling—are passed on generationally. They enable access to social and economic capital and enhance one’s prospects across linked domains (such as schooling, marriage, and employment). The study attends, then, to areas of *overt prejudice* while also expanding the ambit of vision to include *implicit bias* and *accumulated (dis)advantage*, arguing that the latter can be as significant as the former.

Altink brings an historian’s authoritative voice to the study of race in the twentieth-century Caribbean, underscoring the topic’s relative neglect by local scholars “as evidence that race is still a public secret in the region” (p. 8). Even as it describes struggles faced and overcome by earlier generations, *Public Secrets* emphasizes the continuing power of race and its role in perpetuating Jamaica’s two-tiered system in education and otherwise. The study’s comprehensiveness and the skill with which it exposes how Jamaicans of all strata reproduce their society’s distinctive racial hegemony ensure its immediate relevance and long-term value.

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