In his new book, the distinguished Caribbean linguist Mervyn Alleyne provides a welcome comparative analysis of racial and ethnic representations in three former Caribbean plantation societies that differ significantly in their colonial histories as well as in their contemporary cultural and political pathways – Puerto Rico, Martinique, and Jamaica – and situates these Antillean case studies in a global historical framework. While he draws on work from a variety of disciplines, Alleyne’s distinctive contribution comes through his own métier, language, and discussion of the emergence, change, and meaning of racial terms over time and across a range of societies. Alleyne’s account brings into relief aspects of the cultural politics (though he doesn’t call it that) of racial representations, charting symbolic transformations through which Caribbean societies have sought to break the stranglehold of inherited pejorative racial meanings. Notwithstanding their relative successes, however, it is still the case, as Alleyne shows, that blackness and Africa remain to varying degrees stigmatized in all these Caribbean cases.

Language, Alleyne argues, preserves and allows us to get at the racial attitudes of ordinary people whose voices are otherwise lost to posterity.

Pointedly, he seeks to find out “when and where and how did the semantic expansion of ‘black’ (and ‘white’) take place?” (p. vii), pursuing this question by looking at Ancient Greece and Rome, Asia and Africa in the first onethird of the book, and at the Caribbean in the remaining two-thirds. Alleyne draws on the history of European racial terms to question the thesis that racism originated in the system of trans-Atlantic slavery and New World colonization, arguing instead, that: “racism was firmly embedded and entrenched in European cultural and psychological history and ... long pre-dated the establishment of slave-based societies in the Americas” (p. 60).

Alleyne argues that the Greeks and Romans of antiquity (unlike their Egyptian and Near Eastern contemporaries) were obsessed with color, basing this conclusion on an analysis of the color terms they commonly used to classify people and places. It is to them that we owe the black/white binary opposition and corresponding negative and positive connotations that have become so entrenched in
modern thought. By comparison, these terms had a broader array of associations in neighboring societies (and in early Christianity), and were not antithetically contrastive. As Christianity spread in Europe, however, it gradually became infused with Roman and Greek ethnocentric usage and understandings of color (and, in Alleyne’s view, race).

New World slavery was built on these earlier ideas and reinforced them. Yet even as Caribbean societies have been shaped by this older system of meanings, they have at the same time altered and contested them. Whereas, for example, the European world gradually merged semantic designations and meanings of black into a powerful pejorative key symbol, a process of semantic splitting has taken place in Caribbean societies that has enabled neutral and even positive meanings to develop beside pejorative ones. Thus, alongside the color term negro – a pejorative originally borrowed into English and French in its noun form from Spanish as a term of reference for black people (and slaves) – terms such as black, noir, and prieto came into common usage as neutral color descriptors in the Caribbean colonial world. So that while negro/nègre (or in Jamaica niega) retained pejorative implications, such connotations could be avoided in contexts where a straightforward color description was intended. Subsequently, and remarkably: The nouns negro and nègre ... underwent a further development. They acquired a neutral meaning in the Hispanic and French Caribbean [coming] to express the idea of “fellow” (that is, without regard to race or colour): un negro delgado, un nègre mince, “a thin fellow.” In Martinique and Puerto Rico, nègre and negro are used as forms of address and are now applied irrespective of the race of the addressee, somewhat like English “mate.” (pp. 105-6)In this regard, they are also used as terms of affection and endearment.

Alleyne is at his best teasing out such nuances of Caribbean semantic innovation, and exploring the varying ways in which blackness and Africa are both valorized and denied in the Caribbean.

The book is marred, however, by an unresolved tension between a socialconstructivist emphasis on language and representation on the one hand and, on the other, a contrary tendency to naturalize and reify constructed social phenomena. So, for example, Alleyne’s use of terms such as “miscegenation,” “gene-pool,” “mating,” and “progeny” buy into, reinforce, and perpetuate erroneous biological understandings of the social processes he describes. An inclination to anchor the argument in biology or psychology emerges early in the book when Alleyne notes the innate human capacity to discern and discriminate between colors, then proceeds, on the flimsiest of evidence, to claim that: “It is reasonable to suppose that colour, rather than other physical attributes such as size of torso, or shape of nose, would be a (or the) most important physical index of classification, ranking very closely with gender and age” (p. 18). In a presentist vein, then, Alleyne privileges skin color over other co-existing modes of social stratification in various ancient societies. While it is instructive to demonstrate the marking of color distinctions in many of these societies, it is unjustifiable, in my view, to insinuate that these distinctions superseded all others, and anachronistic to describe them in terms of “race,” that peculiar cultural theory that emerges in the modern West to rationalize and justify its own oppressive system of social stratification.
A similar tension marks Alleyne’s Caribbean case studies. He struggles for a way to recount the sociological trajectory of racially and ethnically marked social groups without reifying their existence, even as he seeks to foreground their ideological and invented character. While we get a sense of the dynamic, changing quality of racial terms and meanings, there is not the accompanying sense that racial and ethnic groups are always being reimagined, and constituted anew. Awareness of recent work on race in the ideology of the modern West by scholars such as Charles Mills and Sylvia Wynter, work on race with particular reference to the Caribbean by anthropologists like Diane Austin-Broos, Brackette Williams, Daniel Segal, Deborah Thomas, and the present writer, and writings in the emergent field of whiteness studies by scholars such as Theodore Allen, Richard Dyer, George Lipsitz, and Ruth Frankenberg, might have allowed Alleyne to better handle this tension.

While Caribbean societies have often transformed racial symbolic meanings, they have not sought, in more radical ways, to question the classificatory order of race itself. Nor does Alleyne’s perspective allow us to contemplate this latter possibility. His account could have taken us further toward understanding how the ideological classificatory order of race works, and how it might be dismantled, instead of succumbing to a sense of its inevitability.

These critical observations notwithstanding, Alleyne’s book is well worth reading and adopting for university courses on race and the Caribbean.

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