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Connecting the Diaspora: the 1954 Brown decision and segregation in Bermuda

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In 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* case concluded that the doctrine of racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional in the United States. This decision helped to support Black local struggles against segregation across the world, as Black people from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and America historically shared a connection of consciousness and struggle. In fact, the United States Civil Rights Movement was an episode of resistance in the global struggle of African people against European oppression.

Racism and segregation were not unique to the United States. White elites across the world used segregation as a means to politically, economically and socially control Black populations. For example, despite being majority Black, Bermuda was staunchly segregated throughout the twentieth century. White elites claimed that Bermuda's tourist industry depended on segregation, as wealthy whites would not come to the island if it was not segregated. Bermuda's Tourism Development Board (TDB) considered it essential to attract the "right" kind of people--white, rich and prominent. Subsequently, elitist whites such as the Rockefellers, Carnegies and Morgans were common visitors.

In 1930, the Bermuda government passed the Hotel-Keepers Protection Act. This law stated that hotel keepers were not required accept guests unless they saw to fit to do so and could refuse to admit persons on their hotel premises on any grounds. A "hotel" was legally defined to include restaurants and guest houses. Under the protection of this act, hotels and restaurateurs enforced a policy of racial discrimination that excluded "many Jews, most Asians and all Negroes." (1)

The TDB projected Bermuda as an island where everyone "knew their place." It was a fantasy in which whites ruled but never lost sight of their noblesse oblige; Blacks obeyed but they respected their due. One 1938 tourist brochure erroneously claimed that in Bermuda there were "no insulting Jim Crow arrangements." Nevertheless, Blacks were not allowed to frequent several facilities "reserved" for tourists. For example, in 1939, white residents of Spanish Point complained that Black swimmers "disturbed their peace," coinciding with many attempts to deny Blacks entry to beaches where they had previously been "allowed" to swim. (2)

These practices continued into the 1950s. In one instance, a wealthy African-American doctor and his wife were traveling through the island. They had registered in a hotel, unpacked and retired for the evening. When the manager learned that they were Black, they were evicted from the hotel on the following grounds, "You know how it is, we don't take colored people here." This was not an unusual case. In 1953, Sir Edwin McDavid C.M.G., C.B.E., a West Indian legislator, happened to stop in Bermuda while on his way to be knighted by the Queen of England. He could not find a room in any hotel. White managers of the hotels in Bermuda did not care about his "status."

Shortly before this incidence, the Barbadian Speaker of the House was forced to go without lunch when his plane briefly landed in Bermuda. And once again, no restaurants would...

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