

Black Nationalism and Black Empowerment in the Twenty-First Century: Decline, Recalibration, or Transformation? An Empirical and Critical Examination with Reference to Jamaica and the African Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Black nationalism and Black empowerment constitute two of the most consequential intellectual, political, cultural, and economic traditions to emerge from the historical experiences of African-descended peoples. From Marcus Garvey's advocacy of racial pride, economic independence, institutional ownership, and Pan-African solidarity to the civil-rights and Black Power struggles associated with Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and other liberation leaders, Black political thought has persistently sought to transform conditions produced by slavery, colonialism, racial capitalism, segregation, and White supremacy. The visibility of explicitly Black nationalist political leadership appears to have declined in several postcolonial and Western societies, generating questions about whether Black nationalism and Black empowerment have disappeared or merely undergone ideological and organisational transformation. Jamaica provides an especially important case because it is an overwhelmingly Black society that produced Marcus Garvey and later experienced the democratic-socialist politics of Michael Manley, yet contemporary socioeconomic policy is rarely articulated explicitly as a programme of Black economic empowerment. This paper argues that Black oppression cannot validly be described as uniformly greater today than under slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, or formal racial disenfranchisement because substantial gains in legal citizenship, political representation, education, and civil rights have occurred. However, it contends that racial inequality has undergone a process of post-civil-rights racial restructuring, through which inequality increasingly operates through accumulated wealth, housing, labour markets, incarceration, education, colour hierarchies, institutional ownership, technology, and intergenerational transmission rather than exclusively through explicit racial laws. The current study therefore concludes that Black nationalism and Black empowerment are not dead but are being recalibrated through contemporary movements involving reparatory justice, Black entrepreneurship, community ownership, digital activism, Pan-African cooperation, technological sovereignty, and demands for substantive rather than merely representational equality.

Keywords: Black nationalism, Black empowerment, Marcus Garvey, Michael Manley, Jamaica, colourism, racial inequality, racial wealth gap, Pan-Africanism, reparations, racial capitalism

INTRODUCTION

The history of African-descended peoples over approximately the last five centuries cannot be adequately understood without examining the relationship between racial domination and organised Black resistance. European chattel slavery, colonial conquest, racial segregation, economic dispossession, cultural domination, and political exclusion did not simply generate subordinated populations; they simultaneously generated intellectual traditions designed to challenge those systems and restore dignity, autonomy, and collective power (Fanon, 1963; Rodney, 1972). Black nationalism and Black empowerment developed in this historical struggle and assumed different forms according to national context, political opportunity, and historical period. Black

nationalism has included Pan-Africanism, territorial nationalism, cultural nationalism, economic self-determination, institutional development, psychological liberation, and political control, while Black empowerment has encompassed education, ownership, political representation, community development, racial consciousness, and economic independence (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Garvey, 1923/1986). Neither concept should be reduced to racial separatism, hostility toward other ethnic groups, or nostalgia for charismatic twentieth-century leaders. Their deeper concern has been whether African-descended populations possess sufficient material, institutional, cultural, and political resources to exercise meaningful control over their individual and collective futures.

Few individuals embodied this transnational political project more powerfully than Jamaica-born Marcus Mosiah Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League developed one of the largest mass organisations in modern Black history. Garvey combined psychological liberation with economic nationalism, arguing that racial dignity would remain fragile unless Black communities developed institutions, enterprises, media, financial capacity, and an international political consciousness of their own (Garvey, 1923/1986; Hill, 1983). The UNIA eventually established hundreds of branches in the United States and developed an organisational reach that made Garveyism one of the most extensive Black mass movements of the early twentieth century. Garvey's importance therefore exceeded the famous slogan of African redemption because his political programme associated racial consciousness with ownership and institution building. In this sense, his philosophy anticipated contemporary debates regarding racial wealth disparities, Black entrepreneurship, community capital, and economic sovereignty. The lasting question raised by Garvey is whether political inclusion without economic institutional power can ever constitute full liberation.

Subsequent Black political traditions developed competing strategies for addressing that question. Malcolm X articulated racial dignity, Black political independence, international human rights, and self-defence, while Martin Luther King Jr. pursued constitutional equality and nonviolent mobilisation but increasingly connected racial injustice to economic deprivation, poverty, militarism, and structural inequality during the final period of his life (King, 1967; Malcolm X & Haley, 1965). The Black Power tradition, especially as articulated by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), emphasised institutional racism, community control, and collective political capacity rather than interpreting Black disadvantage exclusively as individual prejudice. Similar struggles unfolded across Africa and the Caribbean, where decolonisation linked political sovereignty with demands for economic transformation and cultural restoration (Fanon, 1963; Rodney, 1972). Although these traditions disagreed about methods, nationalism, integration, socialism, capitalism, and political violence, they shared a rejection of the assumption that Black disadvantage resulted primarily from individual inadequacy. Instead, they insisted that historically constructed institutions could generate unequal outcomes even when individuals appeared formally free.

Jamaica occupies a distinctive location in this political genealogy because the island produced Garvey and subsequently developed political traditions that connected national sovereignty, working-class mobilisation, Black consciousness, Third World solidarity, and redistribution. Michael Manley's political programme of the 1970s was not simply Black nationalism, since democratic socialism, Jamaican nationalism, social democracy, anti-imperialism, and non-alignment were central components of his political ideology (Kaufman, 1988; Manley, 1974). Nevertheless, Manley's political language frequently associated national development with social equality, popular participation, educational expansion, workers' advancement, sovereignty, and solidarity with African liberation struggles. Scholarship on the period demonstrates that the Manley experiment attempted significant social transformation while simultaneously encountering major domestic economic and political constraints (James, 1983; Kaufman, 1988). The later decline of explicitly ideological language concerning Black consciousness, socialism, and Third World liberation does not mean that Jamaican governments abandoned programmes benefiting poor or predominantly Black communities. It does, however, raise a legitimate question regarding whether poverty reduction and universal social policy can be considered equivalent to deliberate Black economic empowerment.

A significant gap in the current literature concerns the limited integration of historical Black nationalist thought with contemporary empirical measures of Black empowerment and structural inequality. Much of the

existing scholarship treats Black nationalism primarily as a historical, ideological, or political phenomenon associated with figures such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and the Black Power movement, while contemporary studies more commonly examine racial disparities in wealth, employment, housing, health, incarceration, education, or political representation as separate areas of inquiry (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Darity & Mullen, 2020; Nellis & Pearce, 2026; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). This disciplinary separation has produced relatively little research that systematically evaluates whether the core objectives of Black nationalist thought—economic ownership, institutional autonomy, racial dignity, political power, and collective self-determination—have been achieved, weakened, or transformed under contemporary conditions. The gap is especially pronounced in Jamaica, where scholarship has demonstrated continuing associations between skin colour and socioeconomic outcomes, yet there remains comparatively little longitudinal research linking colour, wealth, business ownership, landholding, institutional leadership, intergenerational mobility, and broader measures of Black empowerment (Kelly, 2020, 2022). Existing studies also rarely compare improvements in formal political and civil rights with persistent or worsening structural inequalities across multiple domains, thereby limiting understanding of what this study conceptualises as the racial progress paradox. There is a need for an interdisciplinary, comparative-historical synthesis that connects the intellectual history of Black nationalism with contemporary empirical evidence and develops Black empowerment as a measurable, multidimensional construct rather than treating it primarily as a political slogan or historical movement.

The central questions of this paper therefore concern whether Black nationalism and Black empowerment are politically dead, whether they have been absorbed into broader social-justice movements, or whether they are undergoing ideological and organisational recalibration. A second question is whether the socioeconomic position of African-descended populations has improved sufficiently for Black nationalist politics to have become historically redundant. A third question concerns the provocative claim that contemporary Black oppression may in certain respects be greater than it was decades ago, despite the erosion of explicit racial laws. This paper argues that such a proposition must be treated dimensionally rather than rhetorically because there is no intellectually defensible basis for claiming that the total condition of Black populations today is worse than slavery, colonialism, apartheid, disenfranchisement, or legally mandated segregation. Instead, the empirical issue is whether inequalities have persisted, widened, or become embedded in institutions that are less explicitly racial than their historical predecessors. This distinction allows the analysis to recognise historical progress while simultaneously examining evidence of substantial contemporary racial disadvantage.

METHODS

Research Design and Review Procedures

This study used a systematic integrative literature review with comparative-historical analysis to examine the changing meanings and measurable dimensions of Black nationalism and Black empowerment. The design integrated quantitative, qualitative, historical, theoretical and official statistical evidence because no single research tradition adequately captures political representation, wealth, education, ownership, colour stratification and institutional power. PRISMA 2020 principles were used to document identification, screening and eligibility, while the substantive synthesis remained integrative rather than meta-analytic because the included outcomes and historical contexts were heterogeneous (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The review focused on whether Black nationalist and empowerment traditions have declined or transformed; whether measurable socioeconomic inequalities persist despite formal equality; and how the Jamaican case differs from the United States and other diasporic settings. Jamaica was treated as a focal case, not as a simple extension of US racial categories. The study therefore compared mechanisms and trajectories while preserving differences in demography, colour classification, colonial history, institutions and available data.

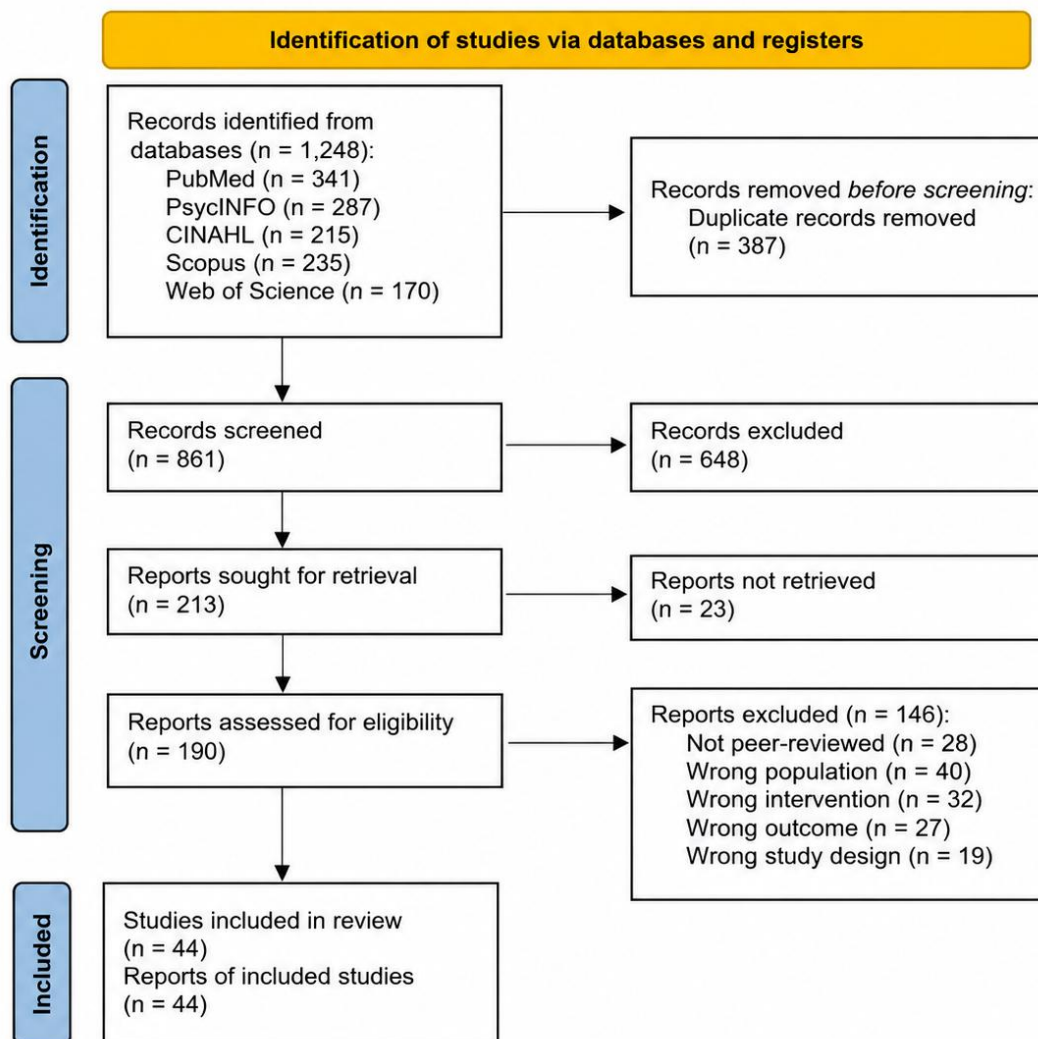


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only (Page et al., 2021).

Research Questions

The synthesis addressed five questions: whether Black nationalism and Black empowerment have declined or transformed; whether structural disadvantage persists alongside expanded legal and political rights; which dimensions of wealth, ownership, education, employment, health and institutional power show improvement or persistence; how Jamaica's colour-class structure shapes empowerment in a Black-majority society; and whether contemporary movements constitute transformed expressions of earlier empowerment traditions.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

Searches drew on Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, PubMed/MEDLINE and Google Scholar, supplemented by official statistics and reports from agencies including STATIN, PIOJ, CARICOM, the World Bank, the US Census Bureau, the Federal Reserve and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Search concepts combined terms for Black nationalism, Black empowerment, Pan-Africanism, colourism, racial inequality, wealth, ownership, education, employment, housing, health, incarceration, business ownership, social mobility and Jamaica. Foundational historical sources were retained without a lower date limit; contemporary empirical evidence was prioritised from approximately 1960 through 2026.

Eligibility, Appraisal and Synthesis

Eligible sources addressed at least one core domain of Black empowerment or racial/colour stratification and provided identifiable scholarly, historical or official evidentiary support. Unsupported commentary, anonymous web material and sources lacking transparent evidence were excluded. Empirical studies were

weighted according to design quality, sampling, measurement and analytical transparency, with design-appropriate JBI principles used as appraisal guidance. The evidence was synthesised narratively and comparatively, distinguishing statistical observations from theoretical explanations and retaining null or contradictory findings rather than treating the argument as predetermined.

Secondary-data design and scope

No surveys, interviews, focus groups or original case-study fieldwork were conducted for this article. Its empirical contribution is therefore a structured synthesis of existing data rather than the production of new participant-level evidence. This design permits broad historical and cross-national comparison but cannot directly estimate contemporary Jamaican household wealth by complexion, employer or institutional discrimination, intergenerational mobility, or causal pathways linking colour to ownership. Primary mixed-method research is identified below as a necessary next stage rather than being implied as evidence already generated by this study.

Analytical boundaries and neutrality

Empirical findings were separated from normative implications. Claims that a disparity exists were treated as empirical only when supported by cited data; explanations concerning colonial continuity, institutional reproduction or empowerment strategy were presented as interpretations or propositions unless directly tested. US evidence was used as comparative evidence, not as a proxy for Jamaica. The analysis also recognises major gains in legal rights, political participation, education and professional mobility, thereby avoiding the claim that contemporary conditions are uniformly worse than slavery, colonialism or formal segregation.

Methodological limitations

The principal limitations are reliance on secondary evidence, unequal data availability across countries, inconsistent racial and colour classifications, and limited longitudinal Jamaican data on wealth, inheritance, business ownership, institutional control and social mobility by complexion. The United States has substantially richer race-disaggregated repeated surveys than Jamaica, which can create an evidentiary imbalance. Accordingly, US estimates are interpreted within their own institutional context, and Jamaican conclusions are restricted to findings directly supported by Jamaican data or clearly identified as research propositions.

Conceptualising Black Nationalism and Black Empowerment

Black nationalism is best conceptualised as a family of political philosophies asserting that African-descended peoples possess historically grounded collective interests and should have meaningful capacity to exercise cultural self-definition, economic autonomy, institutional control, political representation, and collective dignity. Political nationalism concerns the capacity of Black populations to influence or control institutions responsible for decisions that affect their communities, whereas economic nationalism emphasises ownership of businesses, land, productive resources, financial institutions, and capital (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Garvey, 1923/1986). Cultural nationalism seeks the preservation and reconstruction of African-derived identities, histories, aesthetics, values, epistemologies, and cultural institutions in societies historically structured by European dominance. Psychological nationalism addresses internalised racial inferiority and how colonial societies may persuade subordinated populations to evaluate themselves through standards constructed by dominant groups, a concern prominent in Fanon's analysis of colonial psychology (Fanon, 1952/2008). Pan-African nationalism extends Black solidarity beyond the boundaries of individual nation-states and interprets African and diasporic populations as historically interconnected communities. Taken together, these dimensions indicate that Black nationalism is much broader than territorial separatism and can operate in democratic, pluralist, and transnational settings.

Black empowerment must likewise be distinguished from Black representation because representation concerns the demographic identity of persons occupying positions, whereas empowerment concerns their capacity to alter the distribution of opportunities, assets, and institutional resources. A society can possess

Black legislators, judges, academics, doctors, entertainers, athletes, senior civil servants, corporate managers, and political leaders without producing equivalent racial equality in landownership, household wealth, business capital, housing, inheritance, technological ownership, or corporate control (Darity & Mullen, 2020; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Black representation does not necessarily equal Black empowerment, even though representation may constitute one dimension of empowerment. A multidimensional conceptual model may therefore define Black empowerment as a function of political power, economic ownership, household wealth, human capital, institutional control, cultural autonomy, and psychological self-determination. Such a model redirects analysis away from symbolic visibility alone and toward measurable control over material and institutional resources. It also permits researchers to investigate whether rising Black political representation occurs simultaneously with persistent economic inequality.

This distinction becomes especially important because contemporary societies frequently use exceptional individual achievements as evidence of collective racial advancement. The election of Black political officials, the emergence of Black billionaires, the prominence of African-descended entertainers, or the success of Black professional elites undoubtedly represent changes from earlier periods of formal exclusion. However, the existence of successful individuals does not statistically describe the distribution of assets across an entire population, and therefore it cannot by itself establish that racial inequality has disappeared. Wealth research has repeatedly demonstrated that household assets are distributed much more unequally across racial groups than individual success narratives might suggest (Bhutta et al., 2020; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). The appropriate empirical question is therefore not simply whether Black individuals are legally permitted to enter elite institutions but whether Black communities possess comparable resources with which to access, sustain, reproduce, and eventually control those institutions. Black empowerment should consequently be measured using population-level indicators rather than inferred from visible individual success.

Historical Transformation: From Explicit Racial Exclusion to Structural Inequality

The major achievement of twentieth-century Black liberation movements was their contribution to the delegitimation and legal dismantling of explicit racial hierarchy in substantial parts of the world. Colonial governments collapsed across Africa and the Caribbean, Jim Crow segregation became legally indefensible in the United States, and restrictions on voting, education, public accommodation, employment, and citizenship were progressively dismantled through political mobilisation and legislation. These transformations were historically profound, and any analysis claiming that nothing changed after the civil-rights or decolonisation periods would be empirically untenable. Black populations gained legal rights, electoral representation, educational opportunities, professional mobility, and political visibility that earlier generations had been systematically denied. These achievements also demonstrate the effectiveness of organised political mobilisation and undermine fatalistic interpretations suggesting that racial inequality is permanently immutable. Nevertheless, the removal of explicitly racial laws did not automatically redistribute assets accumulated under earlier regimes of racial exclusion.

This distinction provides the foundation for what may be described as post-civil-rights racial restructuring. Under classical racial domination, legal racial classification often directly determined exclusion, meaning that race was explicitly incorporated into law, regulation, political institutions, housing practices, employment, and education. Under contemporary conditions, the causal chain may be considerably longer because historically racialised inequality can influence accumulated family wealth, which affects neighbourhood residence, educational opportunity, employment prospects, access to credit, homeownership, business formation, and subsequent intergenerational wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Rothstein, 2017). Formal racial exclusion can therefore decline substantially while socioeconomic inequalities generated under earlier discriminatory systems remain influential. Bonilla-Silva (2018) argues that post-civil-rights racial inequality is frequently reproduced through apparently race-neutral institutional arrangements rather than exclusively through overt racial ideology. The important analytical implication is that racism need not operate identically across historical periods to reproduce racially patterned outcomes.

Consider a hypothetical multigenerational example involving property ownership. If the first generation of a racial group is systematically excluded from acquiring appreciating property, the second generation is likely to inherit less wealth even if discriminatory laws have been repealed. Lower inherited wealth can reduce the

ability of parents to finance university education, provide housing deposits, capitalise businesses, or assist children during periods of unemployment. The third and fourth generations may consequently experience disadvantages derived partly from historical exclusion even when no contemporary statute explicitly prevents them from acquiring assets. This mechanism illustrates why household wealth is conceptually different from current income because wealth contains accumulated historical advantages and disadvantages (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Structural inequality is therefore partly temporal, meaning that the consequences of yesterday's exclusions can remain embedded in today's apparently neutral markets.

Comparative Evidence from the United States

US data provide a comparatively rich benchmark for distinguishing formal inclusion from material equality. Federal Reserve evidence reported median family wealth of about US\$188,200 for White families and US\$24,100 for Black families in 2019, while analysis of the 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances found that the absolute White-Black median wealth gap increased even as wealth rose across major groups (Bhutta et al., 2020; Aladangady et al., 2023). Housing data likewise showed a large homeownership gap, and labour-force evidence has repeatedly documented higher Black unemployment. These indicators support a specific conclusion about persistent US racial economic inequality; they are not assumed to quantify Jamaican inequality.

Other US domains show why historical progress and contemporary disadvantage must be evaluated separately. The post-1970 expansion of incarceration produced a major deterioration in one institutional domain, while health research continues to document racial differences in premature mortality, chronic disease and adverse social determinants (Alexander, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2017; Town et al., 2024). At the same time, legal citizenship, voting access, educational opportunity and political representation improved dramatically relative to earlier periods. The appropriate comparative concept is therefore a racial progress paradox: different dimensions of freedom and inequality can move in different directions rather than forming a single measure of oppression.

For this article, these US findings serve as comparative evidence concerning mechanisms such as accumulated wealth, housing, labour markets and institutional exposure. Their value lies in showing how formally race-neutral institutions can reproduce unequal outcomes after explicit legal exclusion has diminished. Because Jamaica is a Black-majority postcolonial society with different racial classifications and a stronger colour-class continuum, the article does not transfer US effect sizes or categories mechanically to Jamaica.

Jamaica and the Black-Majority Paradox

Jamaica offers an analytically distinctive case because more than 90% of its population identifies as Black, making conventional Black-versus-White statistical comparisons considerably less informative than in racially heterogeneous societies (Kelly, 2020). The country's demographic structure has contributed to a longstanding tendency to conceptualise Jamaican inequality primarily in terms of class rather than race. However, the predominance of Black racial identification does not logically establish the absence of racialised stratification, especially when colonial status hierarchies historically differentiated individuals according to colour, ancestry, class, education, and proximity to European cultural norms. Jamaica therefore permits researchers to investigate whether racial inequality can operate in Blackness rather than simply between clearly separated racial categories. This conceptual problem is important because broad racial categories can conceal meaningful variation when most of a population selects the same racial identity. Skin complexion, colour classification, inherited status, and class may consequently reveal dimensions of stratification that conventional racial categories overlook.

Kelly's (2020) empirical research provides strong evidence supporting this interpretation. Using data from the 2014 Americas Barometer survey, Kelly investigated associations between categorical race, skin colour, years of education, and household amenities and found that skin colour was significantly associated with socioeconomic outcomes in Jamaica. Her subsequent research using additional waves of Americas Barometer data has continued to demonstrate the persistence of colour-based socioeconomic inequality among Black Jamaicans, including differences in asset ownership associated with skin shade (Kelly, 2026). These findings

challenge the assumption that a Black-majority society necessarily becomes racially egalitarian once political control passes to Black elected officials. Instead, they suggest that colonial racial hierarchies may be reproduced through interracial colour stratification. Jamaican inequality should therefore be analysed simultaneously through race, colour, class, education, occupation, family background, geography, and wealth rather than reduced to any single explanatory dimension.

This produces what may be described as the Black-majority paradox, whereby demographic dominance and political representation coexist with persistent socioeconomic stratification associated with colour and historical racial hierarchy. In such a society, the conventional language of minority racial discrimination becomes less useful because Black people constitute much of the population. Nevertheless, lighter complexion, mixed ancestry, inherited privilege, class position, and access to elite institutions may continue to interact in ways rooted partly in colonial history (Kelly, 2020, 2022). The result is that racial inequality may become analytically invisible precisely because Black people constitute the numerical majority. Political independence can therefore coexist with social structures that continue to reward characteristics historically associated with higher status under colonialism. This insight makes Jamaica important to global theories of racial stratification because it demonstrates that majority status alone does not dissolve the historical consequences of race.

Colourism as a Mechanism of Postcolonial Stratification

Colourism should not be interpreted merely as an aesthetic preference for lighter skin because its historical roots are connected to systems in which proximity to European ancestry could influence access to education, employment, property, social prestige, and political opportunity. In colonial societies throughout the Caribbean, complex status hierarchies developed around colour, class, legal status, occupation, and ancestry, and these hierarchies did not necessarily disappear with emancipation or political independence. Fanon's analysis of colonial psychology remains relevant because colonial domination can shape standards of beauty, language, cultural prestige, knowledge, and social desirability in ways that survive the formal end of colonial rule (Fanon, 1952/2008). Contemporary Jamaican research transforms this historical argument into an empirically measurable proposition by demonstrating associations between skin shade and socioeconomic outcomes (Kelly, 2020, 2026). Colourism therefore represents a potential bridge between historical racial domination and contemporary class inequality. It provides one mechanism through which colonial stratification may persist without explicit racial laws.

The persistence of colourism also complicates conventional understandings of Black solidarity. If socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages are distributed partly according to gradations of complexion in a predominantly Black population, racial identity alone may not generate a uniform socioeconomic experience. Darker-skinned and lighter-skinned Jamaicans may both identify as Black while encountering different social evaluations, opportunities, or material outcomes. This means that Black empowerment policy in Jamaica would require more precise measurement than broad racial categorisation alone. Researchers would need to incorporate complexion, parental socioeconomic position, educational attainment, occupational status, asset ownership, neighbourhood, sex, and geography into multivariate analyses. Such research would allow scholars to distinguish whether observed colour inequalities operate independently or primarily through class and family background. A serious twenty-first-century Black empowerment framework must therefore be empirical enough to test these competing explanations rather than relying on historical assumptions.

Poverty Reduction is Not Equivalent to Black Empowerment

Contemporary Jamaica also demonstrates why poverty reduction should not be conceptually equated with empowerment. The Planning Institute of Jamaica reported that the national poverty rate declined from 16.7% in 2021 to 8.2% in 2023, representing the lowest official poverty rate recorded since the measurement series began in 1989 (Planning Institute of Jamaica [PIOJ], 2025). This represents an important socioeconomic achievement and should be acknowledged rather than dismissed simply because inequalities remain. Poverty reduction improves material wellbeing and can expand access to food, housing, education, health services, and other necessities. Nevertheless, escaping measured poverty does not necessarily mean that households possess significant assets, land, savings, business ownership, investment portfolios, technological resources, or

intergenerational wealth. Poverty alleviation and empowerment therefore measure related but conceptually different developmental outcomes.

Poverty policy asks how individuals and households can achieve minimum levels of consumption and social wellbeing, whereas empowerment policy asks whether historically disadvantaged populations are acquiring the assets and institutional power necessary to shape their long-term economic futures. A household can rise above an official poverty threshold while remaining economically vulnerable to illness, unemployment, inflation, natural disasters, or other financial shocks. Likewise, a community can experience falling poverty rates without increasing its ownership of major businesses, land, technology companies, financial institutions, or investment capital. Black empowerment requires measurement of wealth and ownership in addition to income and consumption. This distinction is very important in Jamaica because an overwhelmingly Black population means that national poverty programmes will numerically benefit Black Jamaicans without necessarily being designed as programmes that transform historically inherited racial or colour hierarchies. Universal social policy can therefore improve Black wellbeing while remaining conceptually different from explicit Black economic empowerment.

Contemporary Jamaican Socioeconomic Indicators

Recent national data strengthen the Jamaican focus while also clarifying what can and cannot be inferred about Black empowerment. The Planning Institute of Jamaica reported that the national poverty rate declined from 16.7% in 2021 to 8.2% in 2023, the lowest level recorded since national poverty measurement began in 1989 (Planning Institute of Jamaica [PIOJ], 2025). STATIN reported an unemployment rate of 3.7% in April 2026, an employment-to-population ratio of 65.8% and labour-force participation of 68.4%; youth unemployment remained higher at 11.7% (Statistical Institute of Jamaica [STATIN], 2026). These are important indicators of national socioeconomic improvement, but they do not by themselves establish convergence in household wealth, property, enterprise ownership or intergenerational assets across complexion and class groups.

This distinction is central to the Jamaican argument. National poverty reduction and historically low unemployment demonstrate progress that a neutral assessment must acknowledge. At the same time, the available official series do not routinely provide the kind of complexion-disaggregated wealth, inheritance, business-ownership and institutional-control measures required to determine whether material gains are distributed evenly across Jamaica's colour and class hierarchy. The strongest direct Jamaica-specific evidence used in this article therefore remains research associating skin shade with socioeconomic and asset outcomes, alongside official national indicators that establish the broader development context (Kelly, 2020, 2026; PIOJ, 2025; STATIN, 2026).

Table 1. Jamaica-specific socioeconomic evidence and evidentiary boundaries

Dimension	Jamaica-specific evidence	Analytical interpretation	Current evidence limitation
Poverty	National poverty fell from 16.7% (2021) to 8.2% (2023) (PIOJ, 2025).	Clear national improvement in severe material deprivation.	Not disaggregated here by skin shade, wealth or ownership.
Employment	Unemployment was 3.7% in April 2026; employment-to-population ratio 65.8%; youth unemployment 11.7% (STATIN, 2026).	Strong labour-market performance at the national level, with a remaining youth gap.	Does not establish equality in wages, occupational authority, assets or intergenerational mobility.
Colour and socioeconomic position	Jamaican research reports associations between skin shade and socioeconomic/asset outcomes (Kelly, 2020, 2026).	Colour remains analytically relevant within a predominantly Black population.	The national evidence base is still limited for long-run wealth, inheritance and enterprise ownership by complexion.
Ownership and mobility	The review identifies ownership, assets and intergenerational mobility as core empowerment dimensions.	These are necessary to distinguish poverty reduction from durable empowerment.	No comprehensive contemporary national complexion-disaggregated series was identified for these dimensions.

Michael Manley and the Jamaican Empowerment Tradition

Michael Manley's contribution to Jamaican political development should be interpreted in this distinction. Manley's political project cannot accurately be reduced to Black nationalism because democratic socialism, national sovereignty, labour mobilisation, social equality, anti-imperialism, non-alignment, and Third World solidarity were all central to his thought (Manley, 1974). His government nevertheless advanced several objectives compatible with Black empowerment, including educational expansion, social reform, working-class participation, national cultural confidence, and political solidarity with African liberation movements. Manley's political rhetoric also confronted inherited patterns of privilege and attempted to redefine Jamaican national development around greater social equality. Scholars have debated the economic record, political contradictions, international pressures, and domestic limitations of the Manley period, making simplistic celebration or condemnation inappropriate (James, 1983; Kaufman, 1988). Even with these qualifications, Manley represents one of the last Jamaican prime ministers whose political project explicitly linked national development with a broader ideological critique of inequality, imperialism, and inherited privilege.

The perception that Jamaica has not produced a comparable national Black empowerment leader since Manley should nevertheless be treated as a hypothesis rather than an unquestioned empirical fact. Later Jamaican governments have implemented education, housing, employment, entrepreneurship, social protection, poverty reduction, and business-development programmes that have benefited large numbers of Black citizens. The distinction lies less in whether Black Jamaicans received benefits than in whether these programmes were explicitly conceptualised as instruments for transforming a racialised or colour-stratified economic order. Contemporary Jamaican development policy generally employs categories such as poverty, vulnerability, youth, entrepreneurship, MSMEs, social protection, employment, and national development rather than Black economic empowerment. For example, Jamaica's national development frameworks include strategies to expand entrepreneurship, access to finance, labour-market participation, and MSME development, but these strategies are not ordinarily framed as racial redistribution. The unresolved empirical question is therefore whether race-neutral development programmes are sufficiently transformative in a society where research suggests that skin colour remains associated with socioeconomic outcomes.

The Disappearance of Race from Jamaican Development Discourse

One explanation for the relative absence of explicit Black empowerment language is that political independence and Black electoral dominance transformed the symbolic meaning of race in Jamaica. Once most political leaders, civil servants, teachers, police officers, and other public officials were themselves Black, it became increasingly difficult to conceptualise racial inequality through the straightforward model of a White ruling minority governing a Black majority. Class consequently became the more visible explanatory category, especially because socioeconomic inequality clearly exists among Jamaicans who identify in the same broad racial group. Kelly's (2020, 2022) research nevertheless demonstrates why class and race should not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations. Skin colour can operate in class structures, and class itself may partially embody historical racial advantages accumulated across generations. A more useful conceptual model therefore treats race, colour, and class as interacting dimensions rather than competing explanations.

The disappearance of explicit racial language can create an important policy problem because what is not measured may be difficult to address systematically. If official datasets collect detailed information on income, sex, education, parish, age, and occupation but do not meaningfully capture skin colour or racialised socioeconomic differences, researchers may be unable to determine whether economic mobility is equally distributed across complexion groups. This absence can inadvertently produce the conclusion that race is irrelevant simply because the available statistical instruments were not designed to test its relevance. A Jamaican research programme on Black empowerment would therefore require longitudinal data capable of linking complexion and racial identity with education, earnings, employment, business ownership, housing, land, financial assets, health, inheritance, and institutional leadership. Such research would also need to distinguish colour effects from parental class, neighbourhood, education, and other confounders. Empirical measurement rather than ideological presumption should determine the extent to which racialised stratification continues to structure Jamaican society.

Are Black Nationalism and Black Empowerment Dead?

The evidence does not support the conclusion that Black nationalism and Black empowerment have disappeared. Instead, their organisational forms, language, leadership structures, and policy emphases have changed substantially. Black Lives Matter provides a contemporary example of a movement concerned with racial justice that differs organisationally from Garvey's UNIA or the hierarchical leadership structures associated with many twentieth-century movements. BLM developed as a decentralised and digitally networked movement and expanded beyond the United States, illustrating the increasingly transnational nature of contemporary Black activism (Barwick, 2024; Célestine & Martin-Breteau, 2022). Research datasets have documented tens of millions of social-media messages associated with Black Lives Matter and counter-movements across more than 100 countries, demonstrating the extraordinary geographical reach of digital racial-justice discourse (Giorgi et al., 2022). Contemporary Black politics therefore cannot be evaluated exclusively by searching for a single charismatic leader comparable to Garvey, Malcolm X, King, or Manley.

The organisational transition can be understood as a movement from leader-centred mobilisation toward networked political mobilisation. Traditional mass organisations often relied on identifiable leaders, formal membership, physical branches, newspapers, meetings, dues, and durable organisational structures. Digital movements can instead mobilise around events, hashtags, online networks, decentralised activists, viral communication, and rapidly changing coalitions. This architecture permits extraordinary speed and geographical diffusion, but it may also create difficulties in maintaining institutional continuity, negotiating unified programmes, accumulating financial assets, or translating protest into durable organisational power. Contemporary Black activism may possess greater capacity for rapid cultural mobilisation while possessing weaker centralised economic institutions than some earlier nationalist movements. The critical question is therefore not simply whether mobilisation occurs but whether mobilisation produces enduring institutional capacity.

The Institutional Deficit in Contemporary Black Politics

Garvey's political philosophy remains ly relevant because it treated liberation as an institutional problem rather than merely a matter of consciousness. The UNIA developed newspapers, commercial ventures, meeting spaces, membership networks, and attempts at transnational economic organisation because Garvey believed that racial pride without institutional power would remain vulnerable (Garvey, 1923/1986; Hill, 1983). Contemporary Black cultural influence is immense in popular music, sport, fashion, language, entertainment, digital media, and global youth culture. Nevertheless, cultural influence and ownership are fundamentally different because the creator of cultural value does not necessarily own the corporation, platform, intellectual property system, distribution network, or technological infrastructure through which that value is monetised. This produces what may be termed an institutional deficit, in which symbolic and cultural influence can substantially exceed control over productive assets. A twenty-first-century Black empowerment movement would therefore need to convert cultural production into durable ownership and institutional capacity.

This institutional perspective also explains why representation alone is an incomplete measure of racial progress. Black executives working in large corporations may represent important individual advancement, but the socioeconomic implications differ from widespread Black ownership of businesses and investment capital. Black artists dominating popular culture may exercise extraordinary cultural influence while intellectual property, streaming infrastructure, distribution, finance, and advertising remain controlled elsewhere. Similarly, Black political leadership can coexist with limited community ownership of productive resources. The question of empowerment therefore concerns the institutional location of decision-making authority and capital rather than simply the racial identity of prominent individuals. Garvey's enduring contribution is his insistence that dignity, consciousness, commerce, organisation, and collective ownership must be analysed together.

Social Imperialism, Cultural Power, and Postcolonial Dependency

The concept of social imperialism can be used cautiously to describe forms of domination that continue after direct colonial rule has formally ended. Classical imperialism involved military conquest, political subordination, extraction, territorial control, and explicit colonial administration, whereas contemporary

dependency can operate through global finance, multinational corporations, media, consumer culture, technological platforms, intellectual property, debt structures, and unequal knowledge systems. Postcolonial societies can therefore possess formal political sovereignty while remaining economically or technologically dependent on institutions headquartered outside their territories (Rodney, 1972). Cultural dependency can also occur when educational curricula, beauty standards, professional norms, knowledge hierarchies, and media systems continue to privilege external standards over locally generated knowledge and identities. Fanon (1952/2008, 1963) argued that decolonisation therefore required psychological and cultural transformation in addition to political independence. The concept remains relevant to discussions of Black empowerment because formal sovereignty does not automatically produce economic, technological, or epistemic autonomy.

However, contemporary globalisation should not be described as simply a continuation of colonialism because postcolonial states possess agency and because international economic integration can generate significant opportunities for investment, education, trade, migration, technology transfer, and development. The more analytically useful question concerns the terms under which integration occurs and the distribution of ownership in global systems. If Black-majority countries largely consume technologies, cultural products, financial services, and intellectual property created and owned elsewhere, then dependence may persist despite political independence. Conversely, countries that develop productive capacity, technological expertise, intellectual property, firms, universities, and investment capital acquire greater bargaining power in global markets. Black empowerment in the twenty-first century must therefore confront globalisation through capacity building rather than isolation. Economic sovereignty should mean possessing meaningful productive choices and bargaining power rather than withdrawing from international exchange.

A Twenty-First-Century Model of Black Empowerment

A contemporary Black empowerment project must consequently extend beyond the political programmes of the 1920s or 1960s because the structure of the global economy has changed profoundly. Asset ownership should remain central because land, housing, businesses, shares, pensions, intellectual property, and financial investments generate both current security and intergenerational opportunity. Black enterprise development should move beyond subsistence entrepreneurship toward scalable businesses capable of innovation, export, employment creation, and capital accumulation. Education should likewise move beyond preparing students exclusively for employment and should incorporate entrepreneurship, investment, financial literacy, technology, artificial intelligence, intellectual property, scientific innovation, business management, and capital formation. Community capital could be strengthened through credit unions, cooperatives, development-finance institutions, community investment vehicles, diaspora funds, venture capital, and other mechanisms capable of mobilising collective savings. Such an agenda would revive the institution-building dimension of historical Black nationalism without requiring racial separatism.

Knowledge sovereignty constitutes another important pillar because the intellectual development of Black populations depends on access not only to education but also to histories, theories, scientific traditions, and cultural achievements that situate Africa and its diaspora as producers rather than merely objects of knowledge. Educational curricula that present African-descended populations primarily through slavery and colonialism can unintentionally reproduce a historical narrative in which Black people appear principally as victims rather than political, scientific, economic, and cultural actors. A balanced curriculum should therefore include African civilisations, Caribbean intellectual history, anti-colonial movements, Black economic thought, scientific contributions, literature, political philosophy, and contemporary innovation. Such education is not intended to replace universal knowledge with racial exclusivity but to correct historically narrow intellectual canons. Psychological empowerment and economic empowerment are connected because people's expectations concerning what they can create, own, and govern influence economic behaviour and political participation. Garvey's emphasis on racial pride therefore remains relevant when reconstructed in an evidence-based educational framework.

Technological sovereignty is increasingly indispensable because data, artificial intelligence, software, computational infrastructure, digital platforms, and intellectual property are becoming central sources of economic power. Contemporary research has already demonstrated that algorithmic systems can reproduce social biases when the categories, datasets, and institutional assumptions embedded in those systems are

insufficiently examined (Hanna et al., 2020). Black empowerment movements that focus solely on twentieth-century industries risk overlooking the institutions most likely to structure opportunity in the twenty-first century. African and Caribbean societies therefore require stronger participation not merely as consumers of technology but as researchers, developers, investors, patent holders, founders, and owners. This technological dimension extends Garvey's economic self-determination into industries he could not have anticipated. The central principle remains institutional control over the productive forces determining future social and economic life.

Pan-Africanism, Reparations, and Diasporic Economic Cooperation

The contemporary reparations movement provides further evidence that Pan-African political consciousness has not disappeared. CARICOM governments formally established the CARICOM Reparations Commission and developed a Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice addressing the legacies of Indigenous genocide, African enslavement, colonialism, health, education, cultural institutions, and development (CARICOM Reparations Commission, 2014). The reparations agenda remains active, and the Commission continued international advocacy in 2026, demonstrating that historical claims concerning colonialism and racial justice remain central to Caribbean diplomacy. Reparatory justice also provides an important conceptual bridge between historical injustice and contemporary development because it explicitly links past extraction with present socioeconomic conditions. The continued institutionalisation of reparations in CARICOM therefore contradicts any claim that Black nationalist or Pan-African political concerns have entirely disappeared from Caribbean public life.

Pan-Africanism can also be recalibrated as an economic-development strategy rather than understood exclusively as a symbolic political identity. African-descended populations across Africa, the Caribbean, North America, Latin America, and Europe possess substantial professional expertise, financial resources, technological knowledge, entrepreneurial capacity, and cultural influence. Diaspora investment mechanisms could potentially mobilise portions of these resources for infrastructure, technological enterprises, education, venture capital, creative industries, and business development. Caribbean states already pursue diaspora engagement, but a specifically developmental approach would focus more systematically on converting diaspora relationships into productive investment and institutional knowledge transfer. This approach would differ substantially from Garvey's early twentieth-century organisational model while retaining his belief in transnational Black cooperation. Pan-African economic integration in the twenty-first century should therefore be understood as networked capacity building rather than simply geographical repatriation.

Toward a Jamaican Black Empowerment Development Index

A major empirical contribution to Jamaican scholarship could involve the development of a Jamaican Black Empowerment Index designed to measure whether socioeconomic progress is producing deeper structural empowerment. Such an index could combine asset ownership, educational attainment, wealth, housing ownership, business ownership, occupational authority, institutional leadership, financial participation, digital capability, and technological access. These indicators could be disaggregated by skin complexion, self-identified race, sex, age, parish, educational level, parental socioeconomic background, rural or urban residence, and household structure. Kelly's (2020, 2026) research provides an important methodological foundation by demonstrating the value of analysing both categorical race and skin colour rather than relying solely on broad racial identity. Longitudinal measurement would allow researchers to determine whether reductions in poverty are accompanied by greater wealth convergence and asset accumulation across complexion groups. Such evidence would transform Black empowerment from a rhetorical political concept into a measurable development construct.

Several hypotheses could be tested using such a framework. First, darker-skinned Jamaicans may possess lower average household wealth than lighter-skinned Jamaicans after controlling for education, age, sex, occupation, parental background, and geography. Second, skin complexion may independently predict occupational status, income, homeownership, and business ownership. Third, parental wealth and education may mediate part of the relationship between skin colour and adult socioeconomic position, demonstrating the importance of intergenerational transmission. Fourth, Jamaica may experience faster poverty reduction than wealth convergence, thereby confirming that poverty alleviation and empowerment are distinct processes. Fifth, Black political representation may show weaker associations with household economic empowerment

than asset ownership, educational quality, and institutional control. Sixth, Black-consciousness education and knowledge of African-diasporic history may be positively associated with racial self-esteem, entrepreneurial aspirations, and support for collective economic development, although these relationships would require careful empirical testing.

Table 2. Separation of empirical findings, comparative evidence and normative propositions

Statement type	Statement	Interpretive status
Empirical finding	Poverty and unemployment have declined substantially in recent Jamaican official data.	Descriptive national statistics; does not prove equal asset distribution.
Empirical finding	Published Jamaican research links skin shade with socioeconomic and asset outcomes.	Supports colour stratification as an empirical issue; causal mechanisms require further study.
Comparative finding	US evidence documents large racial wealth, housing and institutional disparities.	Useful for mechanism comparison, not direct estimation of Jamaican racial inequality.
Normative proposition	Black empowerment should include ownership, wealth, education, institutional capacity and technological capability.	A value-laden policy framework derived from the synthesis, not an empirical finding that these priorities are universally preferred.
Research proposition	A Jamaican Black Empowerment Development Index and primary surveys could test complexion, assets and mobility.	Proposed future research; not a validated instrument or result of the present study.

Primary Research Agenda for Jamaica

The most important next step is primary Jamaican research capable of testing rather than assuming the relationships proposed in this review. A nationally stratified household survey could measure self-identified race, interviewer-rated skin shade, income, financial and non-financial assets, home and land ownership, business ownership, debt, inheritance, parental socioeconomic position, education, occupation, digital assets and intergenerational transfers. Multivariable models could then estimate whether complexion remains associated with wealth and mobility after adjustment for age, sex, education, parish, rural-urban residence, occupation and family background.

A complementary qualitative component should include interviews or focus groups with entrepreneurs, employers, educators, financial-sector professionals, community leaders and households across complexion and class positions. Case studies of business financing, land and housing acquisition, educational mobility and institutional leadership could identify mechanisms that aggregate statistics cannot capture. This mixed-method design would directly address the principal limitation of the present secondary-data study and provide the empirical foundation needed before a Jamaican Black Empowerment Development Index could be validated.

Discussion: The Institutional Location of Oppression Has Changed

The central finding is not that Black socioeconomic conditions have moved uniformly toward either liberation or deterioration. The evidence instead supports differentiated trajectories: major historical gains in citizenship, political participation, education and professional mobility coexist with persistent inequalities in selected economic and institutional domains. US data provide strong evidence for racial wealth, housing and criminal-justice disparities, whereas Jamaican evidence is more limited and is organised primarily around colour stratification, poverty, labour-market conditions and the distinction between national development and asset-based empowerment. This asymmetry in evidence is treated as a limitation rather than filled by importing US estimates into Jamaica.

For Jamaica, the most defensible conclusion is that Black-majority political representation and socioeconomic progress do not make colour and class analytically irrelevant. Poverty fell markedly by 2023, and unemployment reached historically low levels by 2026, yet these national improvements do not answer whether wealth, property, enterprise ownership and institutional authority are converging across complexion

and family background. Existing Jamaican studies support the continued relevance of skin shade to socioeconomic outcomes, but the evidence base remains too thin to quantify a comprehensive national “wealth gap” by colour. The paper therefore distinguishes demonstrated national progress, demonstrated colour-associated disparities and unanswered questions about ownership and mobility.

The study’s conceptual contribution is the distinction between representation and multidimensional empowerment. Its policy-oriented propositions concerning ownership, technological capacity, institutional development and Pan-African cooperation should be read as implications generated by the synthesis, not as neutral empirical findings. Whether Jamaicans endorse these priorities, whether the proposed dimensions form a valid index and whether they predict social mobility require primary empirical testing. This separation of evidence from prescription is necessary for maintaining analytical neutrality while preserving the paper’s theoretical contribution.

Recalibrating Black Nationalism for the Twenty-First Century

The synthesis suggests that one contemporary interpretation of Black nationalism is institutional self-determination within an interconnected world rather than racial isolationism. In analytical terms, this interpretation gives attention to dignity, ownership, knowledge, technological capability, community institutions, democratic participation and transnational African cooperation. These components should be treated as normative propositions derived from historical empowerment traditions, not as empirically validated policy prescriptions. Their relevance and public support would need to be tested through primary research in Jamaica and other settings.

From this perspective, Black nationalism may be better described as transformed or recalibrated than extinct. Earlier vocabularies of Black Power, enterprise and Pan-African solidarity increasingly overlap with contemporary discussions of racial justice, wealth gaps, minority enterprise, community wealth building, reparatory justice and diaspora cooperation. The degree of continuity is an interpretive question rather than a direct empirical equivalence, and the labels adopted by present-day movements vary substantially across countries.

CONCLUSION

This review concludes that Black nationalism and Black empowerment are more accurately understood as transformed and contested traditions than as either fully extinct or unchanged. The historical record shows substantial gains in legal equality, political participation, education and professional opportunity, while contemporary evidence also documents persistent material and institutional inequalities in specific settings. Jamaica requires analytical caution: recent official data show major progress in poverty reduction and employment, while research on complexion indicates that colour-linked socioeconomic differences have not become irrelevant. However, the present secondary-data evidence is insufficient to establish a comprehensive Jamaican wealth, ownership or mobility gradient by skin shade. The study therefore advances a measurable, multidimensional conception of empowerment while explicitly separating empirical findings from normative proposals. Future primary Jamaican surveys, interviews and case studies are required to test the proposed relationships among complexion, wealth, ownership, education, social mobility and institutional control.

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