

Interview 13

Ethnic Group: Caribbean (St. Vincent & the Grenadines)

Date: August 5, 1993

Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: male

Age: 50

Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines

Education:

Occupation: unemployed

Year of arrival: 1964

Marital status: married

Children: daughter 17; son 16; son 12; older son by another partner lives in New York

COMMENTS: I interviewed "Ross" at his home in Lasalle at 10:30 in the morning. We were alone for the interview but his kids were using the kitchen next to the living room throughout. They were going in and out the door as well to see their cousin who lives upstairs in the top part of the duplex. He had to leave the interview once to resolve a conflict between the cousin and her mother. The house was neat, although not impeccably clean. The main colours were brown in the living room and kitchen with glass art and crochet art on the coffee tables. Individual portraits of family members were on the wall. He was smoking throughout the interview. He was positioned on the couch next to a folding TV table with a cup of coffee and the remote control. I was not offered a drink. It is my opinion that there was a strain in the interview because of my perceived 'White privilege'. That is, he may have spoken differently to a Black interviewer. Most of his responses to my questions involved his views on racism and inequality regardless of the aim of the question. He seemed despondent as he explained.

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE:

I: Who was the first in your family to come to Canada and when?

R: My sister, in late 50's. She came on the domestic scheme. I heard her tell stories from working and living here that if you repeat these stories it gets you angry. Understand? The unfortunate thing is that it still happens today. She was so disgusted at one point that she actually wrote home to say that she couldn't stand it. So she sent for another one of my sisters. She left a decent job at home but the domestic scheme was just putting in time [before a better job].

I: Did your sisters live together?

R: Yes.

I: Did they sponsor you?

R: Yes.

I: What was your occupation before you got here?

R: I taught school.

I: What was your first job here?

R: At the [hospital in Montreal] as an orderly. I worked there for 6 months, then I went to Toronto to [technical training institute] for two years. I studied electronics and engineering technologies, but I had to work during the period, at [hospital in Toronto]. You had people to fall back on [addressing the interviewer] and I didn't.

I: After that?

R: I came back to Montreal. They had interviewed us on campus for jobs and I got a job at [telecommunication company]. We had the option of staying in Toronto or going to Montreal but because my sisters were here, I had roots, I came back. Looking back it was a big mistake. After the nationalist movement in Quebec got stronger, they had to make French people more visible, managers. I'm English speaking but I'm not English. You have to be Anglo Saxon white to be... I'm just there as a minority. There was just a handful of us (Blacks) where I worked and none of them were managers. So in the jockeying for position if you haven't got someone of your nationality up the line, nobody's going to take care of you. Often, those at the bottom have connections, through one's father. When immigrants come here they have nobody on the higher echelon. For example, people with this advantage may have protection if they find out in advance of certain budget cuts, etc., they can get out... We had no such protection. I worked there for fifteen years. A lot of the operation was being shipped to Toronto, but by that time I had set down roots in Montreal. I got married, in 1974.

I: Is she from St. Vincent as well?

R: Yes. I met her here. I had known her on a friendly basis because she was on another island, and so people tend to know of each other.

I: How many children do you have?

R: Three.

I: How old are they?

R: My daughter is seventeen, my son is sixteen and my other son is twelve.

I: Do you have any other children?

R: Yes. I have another son who lives in New York.

I: What did you know about Canada before you came?

R: I knew a lot. The education in the West Indies is such that you know the history and geography of the British empire...

I: Besides your sisters being here, what attracted you to come to Canada?

R: During the fifties, immigration to England was so high that they had to change the law. The door to England was closed. The U.S. was more difficult too. Although I had sisters there I had to wait too long to get the visa. So Canada

was the path of least of resistance.

I: How did you find your first residence here?

R: I lived with my sisters.

I: What about the next residence?

R: I never had to find a residence because I moved to Toronto after six months. By the time I got back my brother was here so we decided to take a place together. He knew a girl who told him that apartments were available in Ville Lamard. She gave us the details and we went there. He told us there were none available. My brother mentioned it to the girl who was living there and she went to speak to the janitor. Then all of a sudden it was available. I don't think he was discriminating based on race because the girl was Black but maybe he figured that as young unmarried guys,...

I: Tell me about your family, who and where they are.

R: I have six sisters and one brother. My brother lives in Pittsburgh, Penn. He works at a research company, the nature of it I don't really know. Two sisters live in Rio, one in Toronto, three in Montreal.

I: What about family in the islands?

R: Aunts and uncles, but my mother died last December. She had been coming back and forth. She died here, and the body was taken home. All my brothers and sisters went home but I was unable to go [financial reasons it seems].

I: How many times have you been back since you're here?

R: Once. I would like to go but my financial position is not such that I can make trips.

I: What about retiring back home?

R: Well you need to get the money first to go back.

I: What about ideally?

R: I would like to go back home, everyone from the West Indies would like to go back home. But you don't want to go back without a financial base to fall back on and that's what keeps people here.

I: When was the last time you got together with your family from New York and Pittsburgh.

R: The last time was when my mother died. They were here. Before that, September of 1992 because there was a wedding here. My cousin's daughter. Most of the times we got together was for weddings because I have a number of nieces and nephews,...

I: What about holidays?

R: No, we celebrate with my wife's relatives here, her sister. During Christmas she comes here and New Years we go to her place. She has children.

I: When you got here how did you meet other Vincentians, like your wife?

R: Well there's a network. For instance I knew people from my island who were here before, so by talking to them they would introduce you to others,... Each island association has functions (dances) because there so few Black people at that time that people from the islands would congregate together. There is a distinction between the older and the youths. At that time everyone wanted a relationship [around his age at the time].

I: Was it a coincidence that you married someone from St. V & G, or did you intend to?

R: No, my wife is from another Grenadine island. When you grow up you want to marry someone from your own island but that was never...[very strict?] I had come to view a wide range of people and I always figure that you have to have a certain degree of understanding because when love sort of fades a bit [laugh] you have more things to fall back on. For example, if I had married a Canadian Black then there would not have been enough cultural ties in case love goes dim.

I: What was helpful in your marriage?

R: I'm an individual who doesn't believe in divorce so there's no point in getting married to a person who believes in divorce. If you have a belief in something then you work toward fixing things, working out the problems.

I: Are those ideas common among Vincentians, do you think?

R: No, it's from my religion (Seventh Day Adventism). I don't practice it as such but there are certain things that you still uphold. You don't forget everything you were brought up with.

I: Is your wife the same religion?

R: No, she's a Roman Catholic.

I: Do you go to church?

R: No, my wife does.

I: What about your kids?

They go to church with their mother.

I: When you look at your circle of friends over the years, who makes them up (in terms of nation of origin, etc.)?

R: Mainly immigrants, from other islands. I met many at rallies, like after the Sir George Williams Affair [burning of the computer centre after charges of racism in the University].

I: Were you a member of the Vincentian Association?

R: Strangely, I've always been connected to the Association functions but I've never officially been a member, I didn't pay dues.

I: Have you been a member of any other associations?

R: No.

I: How about a political party?

R: No, I don't believe in them because we have no representation. It doesn't matter what we do, we'll never be represented. We're just taken for granted. Even English speaking people don't have a party to vote for. They can't vote for the PQ so they vote for the Liberals. I don't consider that a choice. For Black people it's even worse. They get a raw deal because they're English and Black. When people say that something should be done, they then say we don't want affirmative action. But we've had affirmative action ever since I know. Look at the civil service in Ottawa, 26% is French. That's affirmative action. They got it because they got the political power to demand it. In the Quebec civil service there's a small percentage of English because they have no power because they don't have political power. And Affirmative Action doesn't mean that jobs are taken away from qualified people. The way it works today is that if it's all White people in a place, obviously they're going to give the job to someone that's White. To correct that you need Affirmative Action. It can be corrected otherwise. If it's reverse discrimination, so be it, but correct it some way.

I: Have you ever sponsored some of your relatives to immigrate to Canada?

R: No. Most of my relatives were out by that time.

I: Tell me about your occupational career after you left [the telecommunications company]?

R: I was laid off. I was called back on occasions but only on a part time basis between 1982-84. That's the attitude companies take now. They don't want to hire full time on the payroll because it costs more to them. Since then I was more or less unemployed. You try different places to get jobs but it's so difficult that you became despondent, you gave up looking. You have no network. Black people don't provide jobs in this country. The White people have family ties, tradition, history. You come here and you don't have a grandfather that worked with someone else's grandfather. You have to compete with these people.

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: Do you think that marriages here are different than how they were in the islands?

R: No. [referring to the wedding ceremony] As a matter of fact I think it's because I married someone from home. We had to foot our own bill. It was never big in the islands in any case for the family to foot the bill.

I: Do you think that there is a change in values since being in North America in terms of the spousal relationship?

R: There is to certain degree. I've seen couples that had they been in the West Indies might still be together. You have a network of people who try to put people back together. You may do something to your wife and she'll go to her parents, and an older person from the community will visit the other side and try to work it out. Okay, you don't have a network like that and up here people take the attitude that you can just split up. There is an erosion of... Individual rights are so predominant that it erodes a society to a certain degree.

I: Has it benefited marriages at all?

R: I think the big losers are the children of these marriages. A child cannot do as well in a broken home as one in a two parent family.

I: What are some reasons that people may get a divorce over that they would not have in the islands?

R: Financial aspect. In the islands you learn to go through hard times. Up here, you become so materialistic that they want everything now. So if one cannot give it to them they will go and get it for themselves. Also, women are not prepared to take the assault that they would in the islands. This has to do with the women movement worldwide. In the West Indies you get away with things that up here people wouldn't tolerate. When we start talking about rights sometimes we get our signals mixed up. We get into the business of women rights but it doesn't mean anything to us as a people, I don't think. We are not the White Anglo Saxon who have got the rights and the power in the society. The Blacks, don't have their rights, how could we give women theirs. Women in the work force was never a problem in the West Indies, they've always supplemented men's income because we were always on the low end of the scale, we always needed things. You're not aware of a lot of things back home, like wage equality,... we don't get into those things. Up here you've got statistics for everything... Back home you don't need to go to a woman's shelter to be protected, the community protects you!

I: What do you think about the roles of women and men?

R: I wouldn't like to make a distinction. In a family context, each person, while they should speak with ones voice, sometimes circumstances change things. I'm around the house and my wife works at the hospital as a senior clerk. I do most of the stuff around the house and I don't consider it women's work. Sometimes you make problems where they don't exist. I had to learn to cook because at home everybody cooks. I had every reason not to cook because I grew up with six sisters and most of the time it's the woman that do the work around the house but you learn to cook.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: What are the main things that you want for your children?

R: A decent education. Job opportunities. A solution to jobs has to be found. Don't talk to me about no affirmative action. It's the only way we can reach our share. Those are the main things and once you have those the rest of the things take care of themselves. Like finding a decent neighbourhood to live and the material things everyone desires.

I: Does your spouse have different or the same aspirations for your children?

R: I've never asked her but I believe it's the same things.

I: Do you have different or the same disciplining practices as your wife?

R: I basically don't believe in physical discipline as such but I believe that once in a while a sharp rebuke of a child is necessary. I don't believe in violent discipline of a child.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: Every freedom as an adult provided they stay in certain limits.

I: Which are?

R: Don't break the laws of home, school, community,... whether you agree with it or not.

I: Did you have more freedom as a child than your kids do here?

R: I had more. I grew up without a father and my mother had so many children that she would forget. She would be tired already from disciplining the others. I never gave her much reason. In the West Indies you have a schedule: you get up in the morning, milk the cows, gather fire wood, get home in time to go to school, when you get home you have a period to play... You follow the pattern. Up here children have so much free time... they haven't got a routine.

I: Do your kids play the same games or sing the same songs as you did?

R: No.

I: Do they receive any kind of cultural education, formal or informal, in terms of their Afro-Caribbean heritage?

R: No. What they pick up is only through community organizations, like the Black Community Centre. There's a self education at home too because we ate the same kinds of food. If you have a party, it's mostly a Caribbean crowd and they play Caribbean music. At Carnival [like Carifete] they get it... although this year it was violent...

I: What would you like to see instilled in children of the next generation of your community in Montreal?

R: Black history is the main thing. We need to know it and we don't. The schools don't cater to Black history. The education system is not rounded enough to include Caribbean geography. Caribbean kids study geography of the world. Here they only study their own history and geography. To me the scope is too limited. Black people can adapt. We have learned to function among every group of people. We can't say the same for other groups. If a change is made, the Black person does it to gain acceptance in a White society. You never see Whites, in the name of common decency that they should see the Black point of view and appreciate the Black way. Etiquette has to be theirs, everything is their way... Let's give and take.

I: How and where do you hope your children meet potential spouses?

R: I haven't thought about it yet. I don't even look at them as teenagers! I have already told them that if I do not like the person they marry I wouldn't tell them who she 'should' marry.

I: If you could imagine your kids in an ideal career or lifestyle what would you dream?

R: But that's what I would like... I promised that I wouldn't push my child into a field that they don't like. But if I could, I would say I like my daughter to be a doctor. I like my sons to be engineers. But let them be the best at what they can

be. They shouldn't live their lives to please me.

I: At the time of marriage, would you expect your children to be experienced or knowledgeable about sex?

R: I would expect them to be knowledgeable but as far as practical experience I wouldn't want it to happen.

I: Where would they learn what they know?

R: Well you don't have to experience something to be knowledgeable. They should pick up a lot at the home.

I: Have you sat down and talked with them about it?

R: No, but if, say AIDS comes up on the TV news and she's looking at that, I would choose that opportunity to discuss it with her. A lot of talk shows raise these subjects and the main thing is that when a situation arises to make use of it. They should learn as the occasion arises.

I: Who would your kids talk to about something very personal?

R: My daughter would talk to her mother.

I: What would a popular reaction be in your community if a child told their parents that they're homosexual?

R: Utter disappointment to disgust. It's not something you can easily accept. We are a religious people and we believe that as far as the bible is concerned it's a sin. I believe that a homosexual can be changed.

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: Are your wife's parents alive?

R: As a matter of fact her mother died three months ago in St. Vincent. Her father died about five years before.

I: How often did she visit them?

R: Four times.

I: Did your kids go back to meet them?

R: Yes, once.

I: If your relatives needed financial assistance or if you needed their help, would you feel comfortable with such a request?

R: I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it but I would feel comfortable helping. I guess they feel the same way. You want to be the one to help.

I: How often do you speak to your brother and sisters?

R: We don't have a schedule. It just depends on feelings. If I think of someone I'll call them...

I: Is there anyone in the family that tends to try to reunite everyone or make sure you call...

R: No. If there's a social event in the family like a wedding, it's expected that everyone shows up.

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent & the Grenadines are there in living in Canada, do you think?

R: I wouldn't be able to hazard a guess.

I: What was the thinking before your immigration to Canada: Did you feel you would be joining the greater Montreal community or did you think you find yourself in a transplanted Caribbean community in Montreal?

R: I thought I would integrate into the greater Montreal community but my hopes were dashed as soon as I arrived. I didn't figure that people were so apathetic. At home you knew who your neighbours were. Here you live in a world on your own. You could be an apartment building and not know who lives next door. There's no friendliness in this society. People have got to have a cause to come together. When I came at first I used to say 'Good morning' when I would walk on the street but they wouldn't answer. How could people live like that? It's a tradition, a way of life, you don't have to know a person to say good morning. With the laws now they might even accuse you of harassment! [laugh]

I: Who makes up your community or your ethnic group?

R: I would say that outside the ethnic community there is no community. I don't feel myself akin to the people on this street.

I: So who makes up your 'minority group'?

R: Black people.

I: It doesn't matter where they're from?

R: No. It is the only thing that you have in common. You may not know the first thing about a person from Zaire but you have a common bond. If a guy from Zaire can catch hell in this country, you can as well, so automatically you're thrust together.

I: What does being Black mean to you?

R: It's just a skin tone. It can mean both of you can catch hell together because of society. You know that if the police is called it doesn't matter who causes the commotion if you happen to be that colour, it doesn't matter where you're from, if you're Black you can be picked up...

I: What are your thoughts on other ethnic communities in Montreal? Do you have any contact?

R: No. There are ethnic federations but I'm not involved. The Jews have a problem too, their cemeteries get destroyed... Each group that has suffered has a cause and they can get together on that basis. I've heard people on talk shows, like immigrants complain about the situation and then you have a French or

English Canadian saying, 'Why don't you just go back then?' as if on the eighth day God created Canada for Anglo Saxon. As if they have a right to this place more than others. Why don't they understand that we're all immigrants here?

I: What would your life have been like had you stayed in St. V & G?

R: I don't know. I have no gauge to go by. All the people in my similar position immigrated.

I: Does it seem to you that Canada is changing over time?

R: A lot. When I came the Separatist movement was not as predominant. There is almost a feeling of inevitability that this country will split up, maybe not in the near future but you don't get a sense that there will be a meeting among these so called two founding nations. And you get the feeling that the gap between rich and poor is widening. When you see the patronage,... maybe it was always that way but the politicians don't have any shame anymore... When people at the bottom complain they find a way to cut out this benefit, that policy,... Once you could ask someone directions and they would explain but now that's not the case (French problem...) There's no concern for each other. They don't take pride in being polite anymore.

I: Who would you look toward for leadership of your community?

R: Not to all these self-appointed leaders. I follow American politics a lot because the problems the Blacks face there. We experience it as a lesser scale. If Jesse Jackson speaks about some problem, I look to him because we have too many self-appointed leaders like Phillips,...

I: What if the Island Associations in Montreal were to federate for the purpose of consolidating their efforts?

R: It wouldn't work because everybody wants to be a power unto themselves. Each island has different music they like. Some of them don't want to mix calypso with reggae. People don't want to unite.