

Interview 2

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

Date: June 9, 1993

Place: Montreal

#### Demographic Information

Gender: female

Age: late 40's

Country of birth: St. Vincent & Grenadines

Occupation: unemployed/ student

Year of arrival: 1968

#### Interviewer Comments:

I interviewed the respondent in her small Cote de Neige area apartment which she shares with her son. The sitting room was tidy and freshly vacuumed. The back door was opened to the courtyard. She seemed to feel at ease.

### I BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: Who was the first of your family to come to Canada, when and why?

R: My brother, who lives here in Montreal.

I: Any other relatives?

R: Some cousins.

I: What was their occupation before they left?

R: My brother was a policeman and mainly he worked with youth (through that section of the force that is involved in youth protection).

I: What does he do now, in Canada?

R: Right now he's unemployed. First he worked with a meat factory but it went out of business, so he did a course to work as an orderly, and now he's waiting for a job.

I: What was your occupation before you came?

R: I did some teaching and then I came to Canada.

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

R: The land of opportunity; we read about the bridges at home in geography and it was so amazing to actually come to cross over them; in the first instance I never opened my eyes going over those bridges...

I: Do you have relatives that left St. Vincent and the Grenadines but settled elsewhere?

R: Actually I'm from a big family; I've got brothers and sisters in London, England, in Maryland, Washington, New York, Trinidad and a brother and sister still in St. Vincent with nieces and nephews but both my parents are dead. I have a brother in Toronto and more relatives scattered all over...

I: Do you ever visit him?

R: Yes, especially at Caribbana.

I: How did you and they decide to come to Canada? Through what contact? What was the motivation?

R: For me it was for opportunity to advance but in my case it didn't really work the way I had expected, but I can't blame it on only one person, like the government... My health went down over the years because now I'm asthmatic... There's certain jobs I can't function very well, like in dust... I have just finished a course in early childhood education at [College] and my graduation is in two weeks so I'll just sit back and I'm involved in the organization [St. Vincent & the Grenadines Association]. I have a son who goes to [high school]. I am a single parent but we are getting by.

I: First place of settlement outside of St. Vincent?  
[Straight to Montreal, to Dorval airport.]

I: Through what immigration clause did you come to Canada?

R: I came on a visitor's visa with the hope of staying and that's how I applied. In those days it was easy; it took me about three months because the points were right there. Now it's a bit harder.

I: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived. Was there anything in particular that happened that made you feel either excited about your move, or disappointed? Did you or your relatives have any problems integrating into the greater Montreal community?

R: When I came here I stayed with relatives for a while and then I worked with a very friendly family in the Town of Mount Royal. After a few years I left and did work in a factory. When my son was born in 1978, I started getting sick. Jobs were off and on and I was a single mother... But I was always around friends; around people I knew from back in the Islands, I never felt alone.

I: Did you or your relatives have any problems integrating into your community of Caribbeans from St. Vincent?

R: I fit right in. From living with my relatives in St. Vincent I then moved to the Cote de Neige area and I never left.

I: How did you decide on the Cote de Neige area?

R: I came on my own. I got my own apartment and shared with my friends and then I lived on my own until my son was born.

I: How strong are the community networks for you: did you ever take advantage of a job-bank, housing service, or support group offered by the community?

R: I did think of the Housing services but truthfully I don't know if I really like that. You know it's the privacy, because although I should be in a bigger place, being with my son, I just feel there's always this interference; for instance if you have someone else staying there they check on you! I'm here, I pay my rent and I'm fine... I'm my own person here.

I: What were you or your family's experiences with the Quebec government's

Immigrant Integration Programmes?

R: I've been doing French courses for as long as I can remember but for some reason that language is just fighting me... but everyday you go learn more, but I should have known more for the time I'm going... My son went to a French school before high school and it gave him a lot of problems.

I: Did the government offer the course to you?

R: I went on my own. It was free at the Black Community Centre and then they started offering it to immigrants only, so I did it through a different programme.

I: How much contact do you have with other group members, outside of kin? R: Mostly through the community [i.e.: neighbourhood] and the association and church.

I: Do they have activities at the church?

R: They have youth programs, gospel choirs, meals on wheels, seniors evening, arts and crafts...

I: Are you a member of any 'Canadian' associations, clubs, like Rotary, political parties?

R: No.

I: How many times have you visited family in St. Vincent? If not, do you plan to go?

R: I've been back and forth four times. It's never been for a vacation per se, always a family crisis like my mother's death, but I have gone to England twice with my son, the second time when my sister got married. So far I have only been to Ottawa and Toronto, no other place in Canada...

I: How much contact do you have with relatives in St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

R: A lot. I keep in constant touch. One sister got married this past year. I have to, I have no choice.

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

R: Yes, two brothers. One living here and the other in Toronto and then he moved to New York and then Maryland. I have an older brother that lives in Toronto still.

I: Do you ever consider going back or going elsewhere?

R: If the need arises and the money is there, sure I'll go but I would come back to Canada too. I am a citizen so I can go back and forth.

I: Who makes up your family?

R: My immediate family: just me and my son.

I: Extended family?

R: I would say fourteen kids. That's leaving out the nieces and nephews and both parents are dead now. I was never married.

I: Who do you live with in your household?

R: Me and my son.

## II RELATION WITH SPOUSE

I: In your opinion, how is marriage different here for your community from how it is in St. Vincent?

R: I can't say.

I: Can you give examples of 'intermarriage' which is traditionally looked down upon among your group and describe the reactions to it? How has this changed in Canada? (in terms of the taboo groups and reactions)

R: Speaking from my mother I don't think she'd mind at all. She was very strong on marriage, as far as to say "You try it once and if the shoe don't fit..." What race, denomination, didn't matter at all because she was strong on marriage.

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community? Is it different from the attitude in St. Vincent? What are the circumstances, which prompt a divorce most commonly?

R: In St. Vincent, what would really trigger off a divorce might be physical abuse but maybe today they give divorces for snoring, squeezing the toothpaste the wrong way, everything is a divorce now.

I: Would a spouse be likely to discuss major changes or other decisions before acting on them? For both men and women? Do they communicate a lot?

R: I'll speak for the families I know. It seems that communication isn't there because I do know families with different bank accounts. In the back of their heads they think, "God forbid if one should step out..." There's always my own dollar and your own dollar-- "Our": you don't hear that pronoun much at all.

I: What are your views on the roles of women and men?

R: If a woman is capable of doing a man's job, let her do it. I don't go for the saying "A woman's place is in the home." In a family they should share the work fifty-fifty. This requires respect on both parts.

## III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you have children? What age?

R: Yes, he is fourteen.

I: Do you want to have more children?

R: No.

I: What is the main thing that you want for your son?

R: My main concern is that the good lord spare my life to continue to give him the tools so that he can go forward and achieve the things he wants, especially those things that I didn't have the opportunity to: good education, because he's born to an older parent and so I can give him guidance to help in school. He chooses his friends,...

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: What I have discovered here in Canada is that it's a lot different from the way I was brought up and the discipline in the Islands. Back there we were flogged--we had a strap. My first thought [as to whether to bring it back for instance in schools] is no. But on the other hand I have nothing but praise for the strap because I was strapped and I didn't turn out differently. But you have to be very careful with the person who uses it. That's where the problem can come. Here in Canada we have to communicate more with children. Back home we paid more attention to bad behaviour and never remembered to praise them for the good. But since I'm here and have taken the course I'm trying to catch up to the things he [i.e.: the son] didn't get before because I tried to bring him up the way I was brought up. Here in Canada you have to meet the children half way and if not you're in big trouble because it's a different setup and we have to learn the different way. Back in the island we were more teacher directed but here we are more child directed. They get more creative as long as there is no danger involved. I know he was flogged by me but I don't do it anymore. We [i.e.: my son and I] communicate more and if not we would be in trouble.

I: Does your son play the same games or sing the same songs that you did in St. Vincent?

R: They were really different. Here, education for young kids is based on play... There it was more academic and we had recess at school in a small yard.

I: Does your son receive any formal or informal cultural education?

R: These kids have the best of both worlds; they have the Caribbean way plus their... He even dances like us. But he doesn't have a Caribbean accent. He never picks up my lingo. There's a comedian, Oliver, from Jamaica, I would be laughing and my son wouldn't hear a word. He can repeat everything now but he switches. He eats the Caribbean cooking but he's more into their way; they like their hot-dogs and Canadian stuff. He went to the Garvey Institute so he knows about Black History. He went for the summer camp course. In the islands we weren't taught our own history. Whatever Black history I know, I learnt here in Canada.

I: How and where do you hope your child meets a potential spouse?

R: I'm not one of those naive ones that says "in the church." My child is in the church; he's in the youth choir. I believe a child needs a church... When he's older and he wants to take his way I'm not going to stop him but for now as a minor, he's there and I make sure he knows the minister.

I: At the time of marriage would you expect your child (male vs. female) to be able to talk to you about private things, and to be experienced or knowledgeable about sex?

R: He does. He's very open. Once his friend wanted to set him up with a girl and I said I was against it because, "you're not an Indian, where people set their children up." I want him to choose his own mate. Like Marcus Garvey says, you have to be a leader. You choose your own person and it's fine with me.

I: Is this kind of parent-child relationship typical in your community?

R: I see myself differently. He says to me we are very fortunate. Because it was just the two of us, the bonding was there. I told him from an early age there are

only three people that are allowed to touch or to see your private parts: your pediatrician, your mom, and you. And I say his mom only because sometimes I have to check him if there's an infection. But now that he is fourteen sometimes I don't know how to touch him anymore; sometimes he lies in my lap and you can see the stiffness in me because he's my child so I explain to him that he's at the age when maybe we have to let go because maybe I would touch him in a taboo place, so I let him watch the shows on TV. [which deals with sex]

I: So you would talk to your son about safe sex?

R: Oh yes. I'll say you are just fourteen but when you're ready I'll be the one to provide you with a condom but just let me know, don't let me be the last one to know. He talks everything with me. He's not a shy kid.

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

R: In St. Vincent, it was taboo. If a woman smoked or was out late at night it was a big thing. Here you can't say it because everyone's outside. When my son asked me about homosexuality he said, how would it be if I turned out to be a homosexual, would the love you have for me now go? I say, you know, he has a point but I had a BIG BIG taboo on homosexuality. Now I'm getting to understand it...

I: Do you think that your parents hope for the same things for your child that you hope for? What would the differences be?

R: Not that theirs wasn't good but the other way for example in the case of discipline, I'm different... Also I just want him to do what he wants to do. In the island there was pressure to do certain jobs even if you weren't cut out for it. Parents would influence children to be a doctor and would look down on being a bricklayer.

I: What aspects of your culture do you want to see instilled in your children?

R: Number one up front I'd say good manners. We weren't allowed to pass someone in the streets without saying "good morning", and good etiquette. He has that because I've been told that, that he's polite. He makes conversation with my friends. He always admits he's sorry.

#### IV. RELATION TO PARENTS

I: How often do married people visit their parents and in-laws in general, in your community?

R: That would depend on the communications with the in-laws. If they're in good terms, once a week a phone call or a visit.

I: Would you have ever considered living with them?

R: If the need arose I would do it.

I: What are one's responsibilities to one's parents after marriage, and is this different for the male vs. female spouse?

R: I'm from a big family and I'm the only one who has never been married... I have a strong family background so I'm always the one attacking because I feel,

that regardless of the Bible, which says to forsake parents and cleave to your wife, I don't agree. Because I'll come back to say, "we are family". Your family came about by a piece of paper--you sign it to come into the family and you sign another to get out, but regardless to what you do you cannot divorce me. I am here to stay. So I get in lots of fights with my in-laws, sister in-laws. If you marry someone you marry the person's family... I have the advantage of being single. But if I were married I would not forsake my family.

I: How often does the grand-child interact with grandparents?

R: As often. First I'd try to work on a relationship with my daughter in-law that I can get to see my grandchildren because if you don't do that you can't expect to see them. They aren't yours.

I: Do one's parents help the couple financially?

R: If I have, sure.

I: Did your parents have a role in taking care of their parents? Were things different then? How?

R: My grandfather took care of us because we were so many in the family and my father was sick.

## V. RELATION TO OTHER RELATIVES

I: Describe your relations with your relatives, where they live, how often you see them, and talk on the phone...?

R: I'll be honest with you, I would have liked to be in contact with my brothers more but there again because of their spouse's problem I don't do it too often. But my sisters, I get along with the brother-in-laws so I try to stay, but I think that distance has a way of helping to that.

I: Are there some members of your family who take responsibility for keeping everybody else together?

R: We haven't done that per se but I would say that would be me because in the family they term me as the person with the big mouth so when there's a problem between the other family and they go to St. Vincent they were wishing I was there. Because they have things that they keep and I'm the one to come out and say, "that's how it should be"... I have fought with all of my brother's and sister's children, why? Respect. I am your aunt and I'm here to stay. You think that because you're married now with a family and you can call me by my name, forget about it, you won't be talking to me.

I: Do your relatives expect you to help them and in what way? Is this different for the male or female spouse's side of the family?

R: I would help but I wouldn't expect them to help. If they help I'd be grateful.

I: What events bring your extended family together?

R: Death, wedding, birth...

I: When was the last one?

R: Death. All of us went back. It was like the old times, all of us in one room.

We were all there together, children, grandchildren. Marriage is not as much a reunion. Once its a death nobody thinks where the money comes from. Everybody gets on the plane. Holidays are tough because we're so scattered.

I: What would you say are the main attitudes of your group toward the family?

R: Here, brothers and sisters don't have that good rapport.... He [my brother] said [to others] you know I lived by my sister so-and-so many years and, you know, I have never paid rent, and they say, "Oh no I don't believe you." I've heard stories, for instance you're on buses and you eavesdrop on conversations, I FEEL for them. It used to be different...

## VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent are there living in Canada?

R: In Montreal, last count, 6,000 or more...

I: What was your thinking before migration in terms of joining a 'Canadian' community of people or a transplanted Vincentian community of people, in Montreal?

R: I was lucky. I know some people who came from the island they don't go to a church, the only two places you see them is the bank and the supermarket. I don't know how they exist. I was always outgoing so I have seen the good, the bad, the ugly. I have been in other groups, not only my West Indian group per se but also the Welcome Hall Mission and we used to meet every Tuesday for crafts and... you had different people from all over. I have good friends who are Whites. It's better for you too, and you learn more than sticking within your own culture.

I: Would you say your ethnic group is doing well in Canada? In what way and what are some problems you perceive?

R: My community, speaking for the St. Vincent & Grenadines Association, we are one of the oldest. We should've done better. But there are some people in our community who say "I don't want to be around Vincentians." So there's always this one group and myself, that tries to keep it alive otherwise it would have been dead along time ago. We have done a great deal for ourselves because now we sponsor a scholarship (or two) back in the island. We just brought up a kid who was at a hospital; we are open beyond the Vincentian community... I know that there are Vincentians that I've never seen but in a crisis we have to get together for instance in the case some years ago with the eruption of the "S..." [volcano]. Otherwise you won't see them. And there is that crowd that says that we aren't doing enough to help but don't help. In my opinion I don't feel that the Association belongs to one group of people. We have more prominent and capable people to run it and they should be given a chance. We should have gone further, let's put it that way.

I: What do you think about other ethnic groups in Canada and Montreal? Do you have any problems with specific groups? (Such as French Quebecois, Black Caribbean from other Islands, Blacks from other countries especially those from French colonies, white immigrant groups, refugee status groups...). Is it a



personal or a common belief among your community?

R: I think what happened here is that we have a colour problem, which shouldn't be because Black is Black, but some people consider themselves Black and not-Black. For instance, like the Haitians because of the fact that they speak French they don't consider them or us from the Caribbean, they speak French but they aren't French Canadians. Before the elections you never saw a Haitian around here. They were in the East End but after '76...they just took over this place completely. They are all over. They are arrogant and I don't know what their problem is...They're a very proud people because being from the Caribbean we all have a certain degree of poverty but not compared to what Haiti has, so I don't know what is their problem. It must be mental. For the other groups that came here after us I find that they are way in front of us because they bind together. There isn't this pulling... What we try to do is we have this O.E.C.S. (Overseas Eastern Caribbean Society), which is a group of the smaller islands, and I still find that it's walking away. Number one for sure punctuality is nil. You would think that Vincentians are not punctual but if you get together you see that it's for all the islands. At least 100 people could be in a hall but you can count them. So there's still this lagging with the groups.

I: You said that there are some groups doing better than you, which?

R: The Filipinos, the Indians, for the longest while we are trying to have our own bank--we can't. For the time we are here we should at least have a building for the islands to use for our meetings...we have nothing. The Haitians have their own radio station and they came after us. Don't forget the reason they came was with the boat business... Here Haiti takes over Montreal. In Toronto you have the Jamaican Association.

I: What would your life be like had you stayed in St. Vincent (in terms of economic and social status, security, future prospects, satisfaction) as compared to here?

R: I would have hoped for better, as I explained why, but I have no regrets because, for instance, in the islands once you get pregnant you're finished, I mean with the school. Here, you have a baby, you give the child to mom and you're back in high school. They have day cares and the opportunity is there. In the island you're now a mother. Except for the brilliant ones who years later could catch up and go to night school. If I was back there maybe I would be a housewife and maybe I wouldn't be in school...

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

R: Yes. The language problem has made a big to-do about it. Montreal is strong at keeping families together and for people from the islands who want their families to join them in Montreal it's hard for the kids to go to a French school system. They can't excel. But at home school is overpopulated so I would not go back to St. Vincent to live with my son because of the problem of school there. I found that Montreal in the 60's was so good when they had the choice to go to whatever school because I've seen children come from the islands and do well. But the possibility isn't there now...

I: What are traditional cultural practices that you observe for yourself and your family? (In terms of religion, cultural foods...)

R: Put aside poverty; in the island parents make sure their children go to Sunday school and church. That tradition I pass on to my son.

I: What kind of newspapers do you read?

R: I read Parents magazine, and child care magazines and I read my newspaper from St. Vincent [which I get] every week so I know what's going on.

I: Who belongs to your ethnic community? Is there anyone not from St. Vincent that is accepted among you, or anyone from St. Vincent that is not accepted by the group, and why?

R: For our association we accept non-Vincentians.

I: Whom do you look toward for leadership of your community? Internationally, nationally, locally, (Name them).

R: My minister because he's there most of the time and you know politicians they go in and out. Also I look for an older adult for inspiration...

I: Anyone in particular?

R: I just like Marcus Garvey's beliefs.

I: How important is it to you that the community of Vincentians in Montreal stays associated? Do you envision a time in the future in Montreal when the community will be assimilated within a larger community of people? With whom and why?

R: I would hope that they don't assimilate because we need a strong Vincentian community not only for us but to carry on because like our organization...has done good things for people in need whether it be for immigration, at the airport, the president goes to lend them a voice. Sometimes it seems to me [that the association will die out] because people don't show up to the meetings. But when there's a problem,...

I: How do you feel about the identity that is known as "Black"?

R: I like Black with a capital "B." If it refers to someone of the Black race I don't want to see it in a common "b." I hate to hear "coloured" people, you're either Black or White, that's how I see it...

I: What is your personal identity? How do you want to be perceived by others, among members of your own community and by the larger society? (In terms of the groups you belong to and your personal character).

R: I am a Black, god-fearing, law-abiding, woman.