

Interview 11

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

Date: July 27, 1993

Place: Montreal

#### Demographic Information

Gender: male

Age: late 30's

Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines

Year of arrival: 1976

Marital status: married

Occupation: Businessman/runs beauty product store

Education: high school, plus university courses and correspondence courses

Children: daughter, 18 months

#### COMMENTS:

The interview took place in the back office of the respondent's beauty product store, (named after his mother) which sells the Vincentian newspaper. It was after dinner time and there was only one other person watching the store at the time. We were frequently interrupted by customers. We were also interrupted by a visit from his wife and daughter. There are times on the tape where I'm laughing during the interview because I could see the little girl curiously taking apart the products at the back of the store. She would also come in the room to stare at me.

The store is located in a central Caribbean area as well, with various Caribbean restaurants, record stores, clothing and grocery stores. (It should be noted that the area is not only Caribbean in character but features many older and recent immigrant group stores, such as Jewish, Indian, and Vietnamese). The beauty store is not very large but is the only one of its type in the area.

#### I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

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

R: My uncle, mother's brother. He was working as a tailor.

I: Why did you want to come?

R: I didn't really. I came because my uncle had a business here and he needed someone to work with him, do book keeping, etc.

I: Were you the first in your immediate family to come here?

R: My parents are back in the Caribbean. It's just like in any community, a family member needed help and so it fell upon me to come.

I: Were you at all excited to come?

R: I was excited to come but I was happy at home.

I: How old were you when you came?

R: 21.

I: What was your education until then?

R: High school and some correspondence courses (through England). Because I worked in a bank before I came here.

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

R: Nothing, except for the 1967 Worlds Fair and the 1976 Olympics... We studied about Canadian geography and history in school.

I: Who makes up your family in Montreal?

R: Just me and my wife and my little girl. Everyone else is back home.

I: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

R: One brother in Miami and five sisters. I'm not in close contact with my brother because my mother migrated from St. Vincent to Trinidad and so we have different relatives. She says he's doing well. I have a sister in St. Croix, doing well, one sister in N.Y. as a nurse but she's seriously considering going back home. I have two sisters in Trinidad, one in Medical school and the other works for a financial company. I lived with my mother's family and my brother lived with his father's relatives and my other two sisters were born in Trinidad.

I: What family do you have in St. Vincent then?

R: My mother's and my father's family.

I: Are you close with your grandparents?

R: They're dead.

I: How often do you contact your aunts and uncles and cousins there?

R: Very often, we don't really write but I call on average about three to four times a week.

I: Is one of the reasons for business purposes?

R: Well we have businesses down there and property so we keep in touch to make sure everything is doing okay. We send a lot of faxes as well.

I: Who do you get together with over Christmas?

R: I've been married for two years and it's just my wife and the baby.

I: Does your wife have relatives here?

R: Yes.

I: Do you get together with them?

R: Occasionally yes but unfortunately they [or I?] work like seven days a week so there isn't much time for socializing. That's why around Christmas I like to spend it with them rather than... because I'm around people all the time so at times you just want to be 3 or 4 together

I: How often do you see your sister in New York?

R: Whenever I go if she's there. We speak once a month. I have a lot of friends back home as well so we've maintained that strong friendship.

I: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived. What were your first impressions?

R: As a youngster I had traveled extensively in the Caribbean and in South America, so I had been to Caracas and I didn't find Montreal to be that much different in terms of physical structures and amenities... I came in the spring so my body gradually grew into the cold.

I: Why did you go to Caracas?

R: It was for what you North Americans refer to as 'summer break'. Every year we used to go to a different island, sometimes with a group, or two family members but mostly school exchange programs. Maybe one year we would go to Martinique and stay in their homes, and the next year they stay with us.

I: Did you find it hard integrating into the Montreal community?

R: I don't know if I was fortunate but I never had a problem in Montreal in that I came here right into my uncle's business (automotive repairs) so I stayed more or less within my own community. After he went back home I opened my own business. We didn't make a lot of money but enough. I didn't have cause to go looking for a job, interviews,... I haven't been exposed to the kind of things other people have been exposed to, like discriminatory practices against Blacks or minorities.

I: How did you find your first residence after your uncle moved back?

R: I was around 24 (in 1979-80) and I rented in Cote de Neige from the same guy I rented from with my uncle.

I: What kind of social events were you going to?

R: Caribbean parties.

I: Who organised them?

R: Different Caribbean organizations or individuals.

I: So who makes up this community that you say you've been 'within' since you're here?

R: I'm a West Indian first and foremost, who happens to be from St. Vincent. Like you have Canadians who happen to be born in Quebec or Vancouver. To me personally it doesn't matter what island you're from because there are so many similarities.

I: Is my friend from Nairobi a part of your community?

R: By extension, sure. We all came from one place, from Africa. So my community is not necessarily West Indians only but back then there weren't many Africans here. A lot came here because of Idi Amin... but that was later.

I: So then your community is anyone who is Black?

R: Yes.

I: What about the Ethiopian Jews in Snowdon?

R: Now we are getting into religion. I don't want to discuss it because it's a never ending story.

I: Are you a religious person yourself?

R: I am in that I accept the theory of creation which is questionable and I believe in God because you can't afford to live life aimlessly everyday. So I'm not really concerned about what people believe in because certain things were imposed on certain people. In my case Christianity was imposed on me and so it becomes a part of you, but to me they're my brothers. If they think differently I'm not prepared to argue with them... But since I'm in Montreal then I'm part of a community which has many different people, Indians, Cambodians, whatever,... But you keep close to those people that you know and understand... because I feel more comfortable with them.

I: So how much contact do you have with your community then?

R: I'm very involved. I'm treasurer of the Cote de Neige Black Community Centre. It's a very vibrant organization, active but not very visible. I'm also active in a Black Lodge, called Prince Hall (started by a Barbadian, a Masonic order). We help to sponsor things in the community, college tuitions, book funds,...

I: Were you ever involved in any non specifically Black organizations, like Rotary or a political party?

R: I was a member of the J.C.s (Junior Chamber International) in the Caribbean. It's a leadership training organization, big in the States. They have chapters here too. But when you come from the Caribbean you're not accepted here...

I: Do you have any non West Indian friends...

R: I don't have any White friends.

I: How many times have you been back to St. Vincent since you're here?

R: I used to go three four times a year in the first 5-6 years I was here. But from 1980 I didn't go again until 1987 and then until last year. First my grandmother died and we were very close, so I didn't have the same inclination to go. The second thing is that I was taking courses in commerce at [university]. I started doing other things so I wasn't fully motivated to go. I went back in 1987 because my grandfather died. Last year we went down because my wife had never been and I wanted to start getting the baby acquainted. My wife is from Trinidad so we went there as well. We hope to take the baby down as often as possible so that she knows, not really where she's from (because she's Canadian), but so that she knows what is available to her.

I: How many people went back for your grandmother's funeral?

R: Everybody that could've gone. From everywhere, and friends... For my grandfather's funeral, the same. From Here, New York, England,...

I: Have you visited relatives in England?

R: I've been there. I love it.

I: Have you ever considered moving away from Montreal, not necessarily back home but elsewhere?

R: The only consideration I've given that is to move back home. When I leave here I'll go back home. Hopefully. I'm not prepared to leave a cold city for another cold city and I'm not prepared to leave a safe place to go to Miami or Chicago where it's much more stressful to live. I think Canada is a safe place to live.

I: Have you sponsored any relatives to come here? [He was sponsored by his uncle]

R: No. Most of my family that traveled went back home. Most of my family didn't want to go but they preferred to live in New York. One of my sisters from Trinidad goes to visit New York every year but although she has a visa is not prepared to live there. [The sister that does live there is leaving.] My mother had been and wouldn't live there either.

I: Who lives in your household?

R: Wife and daughter.

I: What year did you get married?

R: 19... This is an embarrassment. My daughter is now a year and a half so about the same time.

## II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: How old is your wife?

R: She was born in 1966 so she's 27.

I: Where did you meet each other?

R: Here, but she also went to school with my sister in Trinidad which I didn't know until we met. She used to work across the street at the [restaurant] but I had known her before because she was living with one of her aunts when she came, in the same building as my friend.

I: So you were courting for how long?

R: Before she finally accepted me, four years.

I: What is her education?

R: High school A levels (which at one time was equivalent to college). She goes to university now.

I: How is your marriage different or the same as how it may have been in the islands or compared to your parents...

R: It's too early to say. It could be different because at home it was a marriage that stayed together whether or not things are going good. Today it's not the same, there are all kinds of rights out there. I'm open to anything but I'm sure it's not the same. Back then, like in any small community, women took care of the kids, did some farming, cooking, the bankers, the financial advisors of the

family. I speak from my grandmother's point of view, she never worked, she took care of us, hired the lady to do washing,...

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community?

R: It is more acceptable. Years ago it was taboo like any other society I believe. Black people don't have the same... Well in some communities the social principles are stronger, like in the Italian community because of the Catholic church... but with us, we're looser. We accept anything that comes our way so that it's acceptable, you get divorced you get married again.

I: What is a good reason for a divorce, do you think?

R: It's a very personal thing. I'm at the age also where I would be more reasonable. If I had gotten married at the age of 24-25 I probably would have been divorced about four times already because then I was more hot tempered. Now if I get in a fight with my wife I don't have to say like I'm the king. If she don't want to listen to me, then what I would normally do is go for a drive... Ten, twelve years ago it would not have been the same case. But people are different. There's some people my age who act like they're 19. So age is not really a determinant factor. What is more important is peoples experiences and the way they see life. Me, I don't want my kid to grow up in a broken home which means I am more or less committed to ensure that my marriage lasts because when I look around me I see my community, I see broken homes, and kids on drugs and they may come from good homes too but if there's a family support then often it's more difficult for a kid to do things that kids who come from single parent homes can do. Since I want the best for my child I gotta take some crap to make sure that my marriage works.

I: Has Montreal affected the values of your marriage at all, you mentioned equal rights,...

R: These things are all over.

I: Would your marriage have been different in Europe?

R: I don't know. A marriage is built on trust and if it goes, no matter where you are... But basically people's expectations change. Before the values of marriage were very sacred and not so today. Society is adjusting to these changes. We don't have control over it.

I: How would your behaviour be described as different than how it would have been in the islands?

R: Not different because whatever prevails here in Montreal pertains there too. It would have been different there too.

I: What is the communication like with your wife, do you talk about everything?

R: Mostly everything. We probably discuss 90% of everything... because any major decisions will affect each other.

I: Can you give examples of intermarriage for your community?

R: I can't say that I know of any, but I believe that there is some.

I: Is there anybody that you wouldn't want your daughter to marry?

R: I can't choose for her but I'd like her to marry someone Black. As she gets older I'll sit down with her to discuss certain issues and she'll probably see the wisdom in marrying someone Black.

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

R: It's hard to define. I don't believe in giving specifically defined roles to individuals. I deal with things all the time from a business point of view, when you start defining roles, things get undone. The way I'm brought up, if the chair needs moving, move it. If the food needs cooking, you cook it. Sometimes it ends up one does more than the other person... but what is needed is cooperation.

### III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you want to have more children?

R: My wife wouldn't mind having more but personally I don't think I would. This is something I'll have to compromise on. She likes kids and so I'm not going to be selfish but at the same time she has to get other things in order, like her schooling is very important. It's not that I don't like kids, I realize that I'm not spending enough time with my daughter...

I: So where have you gotten your values? Was there a particular role model in your life?

R: I guess I'm a mixture of different people. I grew up in a home that's very strong on certain principles, there's things you observe. I had friends that were older than me always. When I was 18, my friends were like 48...

I: What was your father like?

R: He was okay, he never spoke a lot. Very formal. But he was a provider, in those days the man was a provider, he was a shop keeper.

I: And now?

R: He's dead. My mother is still alive, visiting in New York.

I: How would you like to be just like your father and how would you like to be different?

R: Me, I want to be like me, because if I strive to be like him, some things are not applicable in 1993. You have to change with the times. I don't expect my daughter to be like me but to have her own personality and to be as individual as possible. But she has to also learn some basic principles because all you need is a good foundation. Honesty, integrity,

I: What do you want most for your daughter?

R: Everything. Health and strength. Once she has those everything will be in her grasp.

I: If you could imagine her in the ideal career or lifestyle, what would you most want for her?

R: I know I would like her to be self employed as I am. We want to be able to reach a point too where when she reaches her twenties instead of fighting for a summer job, she'll be able to go to China to see how the Chinese live. We only enrich our lives when we observe how other people do things. They may have a better way and we'd only know if we go to see... This is the second year I took her [my daughter] to the Oka pow-wow.

I: Do you think a lot of people in your community feel that way?

R: We are a bit privileged. My wife doesn't work, she gets to spend time with our daughter. Other families may be single parent. The mother has to hustle two jobs to make sure the kids get something. I believe they have same intentions but not able to implement them.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: A lot, maybe too much. My daughter maybe has too much because she's at that age but when she gets older we'll need to show some discipline to respect other people's property...

I: What are some disciplining practices that you and your wife would agree on?

R: We hope we'll never have to hit her but sometimes it's unavoidable.

I: When you were brought up?

R: I got spanks but I don't know that it makes a difference. We'll hope we can reason with her...

I: Does your wife have different aspirations for your daughter?

R: She wants more than me. Maybe Prime Minister... I didn't go so far because I don't know that I'm going to be here.

I: Does she play the same games or sing the same songs that you did?

R: Some of the same.

I: Is she going to receive any formal or informal cultural education?

R: As much as possible and in whatever form is available. We wouldn't necessarily choose the Garvey Institute for that reason but we will explore the avenues available to us, to ensure that she gets the cultural information necessary to instill pride in her.

I: What do you consider to be important cultural information?

R: Black history. I will encourage her to read as much as possible, videos. After she reaches a certain age, it's up to her.

I: What about dance classes?

R: Yes, we will put her in tap and ballet.

I: What about African dance?

R: Yes if she wants. In order for her to be as good as and better than she also has to understand the way other races behave. She'll go to school with White kids...

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



R: I haven't thought about it yet but my personal choice is for her to marry Black. We're very flexible. We won't force her to marry Black.

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

R: There's information out there for everybody.

I: Where will she get her information from?

R: From her mother or me. Her mother plans to be quite open with her. I'll tell her what to look out for [laugh]. The facts are that people are having sex at a much younger age than when I was growing up. So if the trend continues, yes she'll be experienced before marriage. A lot of times what kids are looking for is love and appreciation and encouragement. If the kids are not getting it at home then they'll go outside for it.

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

R: Bad news, even today. Because I know of a very recent case. He was asked to leave home and the mother threatened to commit suicide if he admitted it... Within my family there have been allegations, a cousin of mine supposedly. He was very good to me, I've never seen it. Younger people like me who read a lot who are more flexible are more able to deal with things of that nature.

I: What about abortion? Is it more of an option for women does it seem?

If a young girl gets pregnant and she's not married, because everyone wants the kid to get married no matter how rich or poor, it's looked upon as a disgrace to the family, but after she has one child nobody cares anymore. Within my community, my immediate community because I cannot generalize, it's not totally accepted and this has to do with indoctrination, the British way of living... today it's a question of conscience so it depends on the religion.

I: Do you think that your mother hopes for the same things for your daughter as you and your wife do?

R: She probably wants more.

I: What aspects of your culture do you want to see instilled in your child and children of the next generation in your community?

R: What do you mean? I don't remember half the things that I'm supposed to about my upbringing which is bad, it's dangerous. I should've paid more attention. All aspects. It must be brought forward from generation to generation. Story telling, poetry, dancing, the different celebrations we had at home like for christening, baptisms,...

I: What makes them special?

R: It's very family oriented. When you say family a lot of people think brother, sister, mother, father but when we say that at home it also includes the person that cleans the yard. We never really looked at them as servants.

#### IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: How often do you visit your mom?

R: As often as I can. It's very tough for me to go because I'm here. I work seven days a week, I do take time off, I was down in June and August (to New York). When I go to St. Vincent I go to Trinidad.

I: Does she expect you to bring your daughter?

R: She looks forward if I can but understands if I can't. Like every grandmother she might be disappointed but she had her own business too, she had a restaurant. We have so many businesses within the family that we don't take things as personally as others. Everybody is busy doing something.

I: If for some reason your mother is unable to live alone, what would she do?

R: She would live with either me or my sister but we haven't really talked about it. In St. Vincent there's nobody now but my sister is planning on going back. This is long term now... Or my sisters in Trinidad.

I: Did your parents have a role in taking care of their parents?

R: Not really. We grew up with our grandparents. Within our family from what I can see they always migrated and came back. My grandfather never left home all his years he went to Cuba, Panama, Curacao, so that seems to be the trend. They go away but they never stay out too long. In those cases the kids get left behind to be taken care of by the grandparents. I don't intend for the same thing to happen with my daughter because wherever I am going we can take her too. Times have changed. In the old days the family structure was there where the mother or woman always stayed at home. Today because of the craze for material things it has driven families to have both people working which is why we have kids out there who don't know if they're coming or going.

#### V. RELATIONS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

I: Did everyone come down for your daughter's christening?

R: No it was a private thing.

I: Your wedding?

R: Private.

I: What would bring everyone together?

R: A funeral or some big family reunion.

I: Is there anyone in your family who takes a particular responsibility for keeping people together, like that would call the family reunion?

R: I guess I'm the one that keeps in touch with everybody. I remember all the birthdays and anniversaries, when someone dies put something in the paper. I have a big diary with all that information.

I: If any of your relatives were in financial difficulty or experiencing some problem, would you be expected to help them out and vice versa?

R: No questions, you just do what you're supposed to do. If they call and say that they're having problems, you just give. You don't ask why because they're not going to come unless they're serious, it's a last resort. When I started this business my mother gave me the money from Trinidad. When I was seeing some companies in the U.S. I had some cash but it was in deposits so I phoned up my cousin in Chicago and no question, the next day the money's there. There was a break-in in my store four years ago so I called my aunt in New York and the next day she was here by plane with a cheque in her hand. Right now she isn't working and I sent some money for her

## VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

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

R: No idea.

I: What was the thinking before you migrated here? Did you think you were going to join the greater Montreal community or a Vincentian or Black community within Montreal?

R: I didn't give it much thought, as I said I didn't want to come and I knew he had a business here that was catering primarily to the West Indian community. I came straight from the aircraft into a West Indian community.

I: Would you say that your community is doing well in Montreal?

R: They're not doing as well as they should be doing. There are serious allegations of racist practices. Never experienced them myself because I never had to go ask someone for a job. I had some irritants, like looking for an apartment and they tell you it's gone when it's not. You usually hear Blacks are usually the last to be hired and the first to be fired. You have to sacrifice a lot to achieve anything in this society. Most people come with the idea of succeeding. Another reason is that a lot of the people who come over now are not as qualified. Also, according to my store, because of the recession of the last four to five years or so, it's worse. But since it's tight they're not availing themselves to things like going to night school, which in previous years people would have been motivated to do with a daytime job.

I: What do you think about other ethnic groups in Montreal, like any problems, or how do you view French Afro Caribbeans?

R: No problems at all. I see everybody in here: Cubans, Santa Domingo, Zaire, Cameroon, Nigeria, today I had four South Africans, Martinique, Panama, Venezuela, Surinam, Filipinos customers,...

I: But do you ever hear any slurs in your community against others?

R: Not really. I've never heard it but because we have been victims of slurs ourselves it would be hard for us to turn around and use slurs against others...

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

R: When I compare myself to what my contemporaries are doing now I think they're doing much better than Montreal. They're all major managers now of major companies, corporations. I have contemporaries who are bank managers,

much more comfortable and much better.

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

R: Yes, when we talk of change, to use a colloquial expression from the West Indies, there's change for better, or worse or both. Canada is a good place to live, I'm not prepared to knock Canada, I've lived here for seventeen years and I've enjoyed it. I came here in the prime of my life and I don't intend to stay until I get old but it's been good to me. If I had a choice to make between Canada and America, I'd go to Canada first. I think people's attitudes have changed, but it's not only Canada, it's a global thing. Like, how we see people. In Canada there's racism and discrimination but it may not be as visible as say what has happened to the Turks in Germany or the Africans in France. When things get tough and tight as it is today people start looking for people to vent their anger on.

I: So you think racism is getting worse globally?

R: Like when I read a story in the news I look for the underlying story.

[Note: the following is a paraphrased transcription.

Like that story of the girls at the bank and there were swastikas in the room, people recycle old ideas. There is a lack of creativity so people have time to smoke pot and hurt others. Another example is the bell bottom pants that are back in fashion. The creative genius is no longer there. Our leaders lack depth. I would've voted for Charest had he won the leadership race. Same thing in the States, Clinton is a let-down. So in terms of leadership, who do you wish were in power, anyone, dead or alive. People still have a deep love for Trudeau not because he did anything fantastic for us but because we were of the perception was that he made the tough decisions.]

I: What about Black leaders?

R: That's tough. I'd love to say Malcolm X. I read his work, but for me it takes a lot to assess a great leader. I can't say Martin Luther King. I mean these are guys that I appreciate. They've made a contribution. Martin Luther King was sucking up to everybody. Mandela, he's just new... I can't really think of any. When I was growing up I was into socialism and the people I looked up to were Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara and Simon Bolivar. They're not Black men but good leaders.

I: How important is it to you that the community of Vincentians in Montreal stay associated? What if they were to pool their resources?

R: I'd go along with that too because as I say I'm a West Indian first.

I: What about Caribbean confederation?

R: I'm for it but I'm only one person. In the Caribbean everybody wants to be king and somebody has to give up something so the question is, who? Everything looks good on paper, There should be one currency. Me, I'm for one party states for some of the islands because an island of 110,000 people (could fill the Olympic stadium) doesn't need four to five parties, it's a waste of money... After NAFTA we stand to lose a lot because the Caribbean was seen as a source for cheap labour but now they're going to move operations to Mexico. The confederation should include Cuba too because they're our brothers too.

I: What newspapers do you read?

R: The Village Voice, Gazette, Toronto Star, most Caribbean newspapers, The Star, The Gleaner from Jamaica, Nation from Barbados, from St. Vincent... also some from Uganda and Nigeria.

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

R: It's meant a lot. Besides the colour of my skin which is obvious, it tells me that I'm from a very powerful continent. I am a descendant of a very great people, creative, industrious and well-educated and learned. I'm going back now because Africa is the bosom of the world. While we ended up in St. Vincent or elsewhere, we all came from Africa. I'll tell you why we weren't able to progress as well when we came over to the new world, we were deprived of speaking our language, practicing our religion, preparing food we prepare. We were mixed on estates among tribes to get confusion among people, so when these things are done there's no way you can make any progress.

I: What is your personal identity, your character, your feelings,...?

R: I don't know, I wouldn't touch it. You can tell from what we discussed.