

Interview 14

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

Date: September 3, 1993

Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: female

Age: early 70s

Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines

Year of arrival: recently, within the past 5 years since her husband's death

Marital status: widow

Occupation: retired civil servant

Education:

Children: son in Montreal (she has come to live with him), daughter in England, adopted daughter in Montreal (daughter's daughter). She is raising a 13-year-old grandson (son of her daughter in England)

COMMENTS:

I interviewed Winnie in her Cote de Neige apartment that she shares with her son and grandson. It was very small, possibly one bedroom, but I couldn't tell. The living area was tidy but cluttered with furniture. There were brown couches and crochet art decorations. I interviewed her in the morning when we could be alone. We talked for a while after the interview about the project. She was interested in knowing what I had found out in other interviews.

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

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

R: My son.

I: What year?

R: 1977

I: What was the reason?

R: He came here to join his wife.

I: What year did she come here?

R: 1973. She was doing clerical work.

I: Did she join her family here?

R: Yes, she had a sister, a brother and her mother was here as well.

I: So she was sponsored by her family?

R: Yes.

I: What was your son's occupation before he left?

R: He was a custom's officer.

I: What did he do when he got here?

R: An orderly in a hospital. He still does.

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

R: I had been here before on visits...but I guess I thought that one person was like another, on equal footing. But since I'm here I don't think so.

I: Was there a particular experience that you had that made you think that?

R: When I came here my son told me about the police, and a couple of days ago I was on a bus and somebody had given me some tickets for senior citizens and I've been using them all this time. This time the driver said something so I stretched out my hand to take a transfer. He pushed my hand away. He said 10 cents more. Anyway I gave it to him but soon after a woman came on with a twenty dollar bill and he said never mind and let her sit down. I don't think that was nice at all. Other than that I don't see a difference. People speak to you wherever you go. I feel quite at home here.

I: Does your son have children?

R: Two.

I: Do you have any other relatives here?

R: Cousins and good friends too. They were here long before me. They came to work. I have an adopted daughter here who came here to work from the U.S. I adopted her when she was about two.

I: How did you hear about her?

R: She's my daughter's child. My adopted daughter has three children here.

I: Tell me about your family here then altogether

R: My daughter lives on the South Shore and her children live in N.D.G. She has three kids. The twins are 29 and the other is 23.

I: Is she married?

R: Yes, she was married to her daughter's father but they divorced and she remarried a French Canadian. My son and his two children. My grandson came with me. He is the child of my daughter who is England. He was living with me in St. Vincent so he came over with me. He's thirteen.

I: Does he like it here?

R: Yes.

I: How many friends do you have here?

R: About 10.

I: Any other relatives?

R: 4 cousins.

I: Do you have family members in Toronto?

R: Cousins, a brother in Ottawa.

I: Do you have any other brothers and sisters?

R: Yes, three brothers in St. Vincent, one in N.Y. and two sisters in Trinidad.

I: How did you find this apartment?

R: My son, he lives here with me. He and his wife are separated. My grandson lives with me as well.

I: How often do you see other Vincentians in Montreal?

R: Every Sunday when I go to church (United).

I: What about clubs or associations?

R: No, which I miss very much. I would like to belong to something.

I: What did you belong to in St. Vincent?

R: YWCA, choir,...

I: Are you planning to join something here?

R: I would like to but I haven't been able to choose one. I have a lot of time on my hands, even if I could find some voluntary work.

I: What was your occupation in St. Vincent?

R: I worked in various departments of government. I was a social welfare probation officer.

I: So if that was your last one, what were some others before that?

R: I worked in the public works department. I was at first a teacher and then I joined the civil service as a clerk and then I ended up in that final one.

I: What did you do in that position?

R: Well we had to go to court if children committed any crimes and we had to give poor relief to deserving cases, mostly older people...

I: Have you been back to St. Vincent since you are here?

R: Yes, I went last year and I'm just back two weeks ago. I went home for a family reunion this time.

I: Who of your family were able to go back?

R: Dozens of us. My brothers who live there, my sister and all the children from Trinidad. My niece from Jamaica, from California. We were about fifty of us.

I: What was the occasion?

R: Just to have a family reunion because we got out of touch with each other.

I: Was there one person who was key in arranging it?

R: The irony is that the person who was foremost in organising it was not able to go. It was my niece in New York. She first thought of it with another niece in Trinidad. So those at home took over.

I: Did your son and grandson go as well?

R: Yes, and one of his daughters. My daughter (in England) didn't go but one of her daughters did.

I: What are your long-term plans in terms of living in Montreal?

R: I cannot spend more than six months if I'm not a citizen so I would like to get my citizenship and come and go as I please.

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: Were you married?

R: Yes, my husband died about five years ago.

I: Did he visit here ever?

R: No. I would visit on my own.

I: How old were you both when you got married?

R: 26. He was 27. He worked as a road overseer for the government.

I: How well did you know each other at the time?

R: We were friends for about four years before we got married.

I: Are (or were) the marriages of your kids different or like a typical Vincentian marriage?

R: Well for one thing, both of them divorced. My daughter was married to an African. She couldn't understand their ways. My son's marriage was a typical Vincentian wedding but they ran into problems. He got married at home. She was here but went back to get married.

I: How did your daughter meet the African man?

R: She was in Zambia working as a nurse. She trained in England and then went over.

I: What are some characteristics of a typical Vincentian marriage?

R: It's like here. Some people here have civil marriages but most marriages in St. Vincent are church weddings.

I: What about how the couple relates to each other?

R: Not now, but before the wife must obey her husband in whatever matters, he has the last say. I don't think it is so anymore because women claim their equality. Also, long ago parents used to choose their wives for their son.

I: How did they do it?

R: Sometimes they would see a girl that they liked... sometimes a son in Canada would ask to be sent a wife. I think that happens often now.

I: Do you think that Canadian culture has affected Caribbean families?

R: I think women are independent here and not so obedient. Maybe it's the government that makes her feel like she has more rights over her husband.

I: What are examples of taboo marriage/intermarriage for Caribbeans?

R: Sometimes they think a daughter is too good for a guy, the manners of the

people, he may not be cultured. Maybe because she has a good education...

I: What about religion, culture, or skin colour?

R: If her skin is fairer you wouldn't want her to marry a [darker] Black man.

I: What about the parents of the Black woman, would they oppose her marriage to a White man?

R: More or less people choose for themselves.

I: How is divorce looked upon in Vincentian society?

R: It's a common thing but before it was frowned upon. When you would hear about it, it was a mammoth thing. It would have been the woman's fault.

People didn't like their children to marry a divorcee. Now it's common.

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

R: It could be equal. What is good for a man is good for a woman too. At home now, women are in big positions just like men and there is no difference as such.

I: Would a husband and wife be likely to discuss big changes in their life before acting on it?

R: I think they would discuss it from either side.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Would you have wanted to have more children?

R: I wouldn't have minded it because I had only two sons and an adopted one, but biologically it got too late.

I: Is that why you adopted?

R: No, because I adopted her before I got married. I always had a lot of children living with me though. When kids from the country had to go into town to go to school, they needed to stay in town.

I: Were they relatives?

R: No, they were children of friends. Because of my work I got to know a lot of people over the island, working for social welfare... people that couldn't take care of their children.

I: What were the main things that you wanted for your children and that you want for your grandson?

R: I want him to settle down and get a good education, that is the chief thing. That is what I wanted for my children.

I: If you could envision your grandson 10 years into the future, what career or lifestyle would you love to see him in?

R: I would like him to be in a career where he could help people like law or religion...

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: I think I belong to the old school. They must have some freedom but they must have authority as well. I think when we come here we fall into the Canadian pattern too quickly. We spank our children at home, but you can't do that here because the government might take that child away from you. That is what I don't like about here. You can talk to them and expect them to tow the line, maybe teach them like that. But when they see the other kids speaking to their parents any old way, they try to do the same. I don't think I would stand for that.

I: So then there's a difference between the way kids are brought up back home versus here?

R: Yes, the children at home are taught to be more respectful to their seniors.

I: Did your husband have different aspirations for your children than you did?

R: I doubt it. He wanted the same thing, to see them make their way in life, to get somewhere, not just be the ordinary run of the mill person.

I: Now that your grandson goes to school here, how much West India cultural education is he going to get (formally and informally)?

R: Whatever he gets will be from back home. From church.

I: Would you enrol him in a Black studies course or summer camp?

R: If I knew about one, definitely I would enrol him. I don't want to lose the culture.

I: What aspects of the culture do you not want him to lose specifically, and that he should pass on to his kids here?

R: Respect for your elders. I would like him to know about our eating patterns, on mornings where we say prayers and before we go to sleep at night when we say our prayers.

I: How and where do you hope he meets a potential wife?

R: I haven't thought of it, but I think he has a girlfriend. She's not a Black girl. I don't think I would have too much say in that.

I: Who will he talk to about his concerns, especially concerning sex?

R: My adopted daughter. He speaks to her very freely, even more than me or my son.

I: Would you expect him to be knowledgeable and experienced about sex before he got married?

R: I wouldn't like him to live with someone before he got married but you wouldn't find many people who don't know about sex. I would like him to be cautious.

I: Do people live together before marriage in St. Vincent?

R: Yes, people who used to work on estates, the poorer class of people used to live together but now it's changed, everybody is doing it.

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

R: I don't think people would like it... Now you find one or two people who go that way but it's not very popular. It would never be open.

I: What is the main reason that people don't accept it?

R: There's something in the Bible about that, and it doesn't sound natural.

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: What is one's responsibility to ones parents after marriage?

R: My parents were living in the countryside. Most people wouldn't expect their married children to support them as such, you could offer something but my parents didn't expect anything from me after marriage because I had my own household to manage. But if your parents are not able to maintain themselves then it is expected that you would offer something. This thing here about putting parents in homes, very rarely do you find that at home. There is one residence for old ladies and none for old men. Families take care of their old people.

I: What about bringing grandchildren for a visit, how often did your parents see your kids?

R: Maybe every month, but if you live in the same vicinity then maybe every day.

I: Would your parents help you out?

R: Oh yes, most families would do that...

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

R: No.

I: Did your parents ever live with you?

R: After my father died, my mother went to Grenada to live with my brother, but everybody would contribute to their upkeep. I only remember my grandmother on my mother's side. She lived with us in fact.

V. RELATIONS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

I: How often do you speak to your relatives?

R: We correspond in writing but now and then if there is anything special I will call them on the phone. What about your relatives here in North America? I call my brother in N.Y. nearly once a week and the one in Ottawa. And my cousin in Toronto maybe every month. We keep in touch.

I: What about family reunions?

R: Those who live in a certain area will get together. I have one pretty soon here.

I: What about holidays?

R: At Christmas we go down to my daughter in the South Shore.

I: Are there any other occasions you might get together, like a wedding,...

R: Not since I'm here. In the Caribbean everybody tries to go. When there is a death in the family the relatives visit and you sleep with them for forty days. We used to have prayers, because on the third night the body is supposed to rise up from the dead so you'll have prayers that night and then on the ninth night again and on the fortieth night. So somebody comes to stay with you. But after the fortieth night everything returns to normal. When I was growing up it was like that but here they put them in a funeral home. At home we have a long procession with the body to church and then to the cemetery which ties up traffic. They should do like here and just get the body to the church.

I: What would you say are the main attitudes that Vincentians hold toward the family?

R: Children tend to take on the responsibility of the parents, in most families you find that.

I: What about attitudes toward having a child out of wedlock?

R: There is a change because if a girl had a child out of wedlock she was looked down upon but now it doesn't matter. People go and live together and not ever get married at all.

I: What are the reactions of Vincentians toward abortion?

R: It was frowned upon, it's not legal but it's done and people don't think much about it. If the girl is not married then maybe that's the reason...

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent and the Grenadines are there in Canada?

R: When Canada opened its doors to domestics, I was working in the Labour department at that time and a good many people came over. The women were screened in St. Vincent. If she had children she wasn't allowed to go. Also she had to have a certain standard of education. We used to give them classes in domestic sciences, because a lot of them did office work.

I: Did you have friends that came over on the scheme?

R: Yes.

I: Were you tempted to go?

R: Well I was married. I had my family.

I: What if you had not been married?

R: I think I would have come, yes. I would have liked to see what the outside world was like, and the opportunities for advancement.

I: What do you think people's impressions were before they migrated to Canada; did they think that they would blend into the greater Montreal

community or that they would join a transplanted Vincentian community or Black community?

R: I think they thought they would integrate into the Canadian community with ties to the Vincentian community.

I: Why would they have those ties?

R: Because they are accustomed to their Vincentian friends and they want to meet and behave like Vincentians, carry out their culture and so on.

I: How about ties with people from other islands?

R: I think they would be more comfortable with Caribbean people but even now each island has its own association. There might be a difference in foods,...but the idea is that they want to be among their own people, maybe to better themselves economically but socially and culturally they want to maintain what they are accustomed to in their home.

I: Do Vincentians ever have friction with other communities?

R: I hear the young people saying that they don't want to get mixed up with Jamaicans because they're troublesome. But you get bad Vincentians and Jamaicans, I don't know why they feel like that. Maybe because there are more in number. You don't hear that a Vincentian committed a crime because we are less in number.

I: What do you think about Canada...

R: In work for example I think my son would have been much better off in St. Vincent, financially because he was much higher up there. Coming here didn't do anything for him. I would have liked to have seen him improve himself educationally because there are the opportunities here. He did start but because of financial reasons he had to stop. I'm trying to get him to continue his studies.

I: What are traditional cultural practices that you observe for yourself and your family?

R: Prayers, and I like us to eat together as a family as much as possible. You can get any kind of West Indian food here. I try to acquire a taste for different foods as well. Like I bought two cactuses the other day and asked the girl how to eat them.

I: What about music?

R: I listen to calypso but I hate loud music. The other day I was passing to Victoria Ave. and I saw a guy blasting his music. My friend said, "I bet he's a Jamaican"

I: What do you like to read?

R: Anything, novels...But the truth is that I haven't been reading much since I'm here.

I: Do you seek out a specific newspaper or magazine?

R: I get The Gazette and Readers Digest.

I: What about the "Vincentian"?

R: Yes, I get it at [my daughter's].

I: Who makes up your ethnic community, only people from St. Vincent or West Indians in general,...

R: No, I have friends who are Guyanese, Canadians,... My son-in-law is French Canadian and we get along very well. There is no difference at least not that I can see.

I: But then who belongs to your community?

R: Anybody from the West Indies or even Africa, but they are different than us in their ways.

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

R: I haven't met a lot of people from my ethnic group but there's a guy I like. I don't remember his name. Anyway those who have made a mark for themselves in this country. There was a woman in the newspaper and she's a good representative of people like me but I don't think there's any hope for Blacks getting into government. Are there any really? I think there was one and someone told him that he shouldn't run.

I: What about international leaders or past role models?

R: Marcus Garvey, Eric Williams of Trinidad, George Mackintosh of St. Vincent was a great leader when we were given the ability to vote, the end of the plantocracy.

I: How important is it to you that the community of Vincentians have their own association - what if they were to formally join with other Caribbean island associations into one organisation?

R: I don't think it would work. It has to keep its own identity because you want to do something for your island. Like if we waited for the OECS to deal with that child at the Shriners maybe it wouldn't get done. You want to do things for your own country. Each island is better off attending to its own concerns.

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

R: I don't like it at all, because I am not Black. People tend to look down on you as Black.

I: What term do you prefer?

R: I don't know. I don't like the term African American either. I don't know, I'm just a person like anyone else. I feel like as colonial people use the word Black they mean we are Black at heart and we cannot measure up to their standards. Black is a low thing, you're sub-human. It can be used to clarify but I'm against it when it's used as an insult.

I: What is your personal identity, character...Who are you?

R: First of all I love people, my own people. I think I'm very honest, I'm progressive in that I like to learn as much as I can. I'm learning French, I love to help people and I don't like to see advantage taken of people because of their race or whatever... Everybody should be treated the same, that's my opinion.

