

Interview 15

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

Date: Sept. 7, 1993

Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: female

Age: 32

Marital status: married

Place of birth: Kingstown

Year of arrival: 1978

Education:

Occupation: student/nurse

Children: son 12, son 7, son 3, daughter 6 months

COMMENTS: Darlene and I met once before this interview. I had gone to her West Island home two weeks earlier as planned but she had forgotten about the appointment and asked me to come back another time. Her home was very neat, located in a townhouse arrangement with a communal parking lot in the middle. The neighbours seemed friendly. The decor was sparse but adequate to suit the space. It consisted of brown velour couches, crochet art work, artificial flowers and statuettes.

During that first encounter I learned a lot about her. She told me about her hectic schedule between working part time as a nurse, raising four children including an infant, and resuming her part time studies in social sciences at university. At that time, I met her infant and her eldest son, a very polite young boy. I also met one of the middle boys who was too shy to say hello. The next time we met I was asked to come to her house at 7:30 at night. When I arrived she asked me if I wouldn't mind going out for the interview since this was her only time to 'get away' from the house and she needed air. I drove us to a restaurant in the vicinity. On the way we stopped at a supermarket where she bought four bags of groceries. We left them in the car and headed to the restaurant. It was very crowded and noisier than desirable. In fact, the table next to us was occupied by individuals discussing divorce proceedings with a lawyer.

Darlene and I got along well. We continued talking in the restaurant after the interview and when we were in the car. She told me about the domestic she hired to help her take care of the kids while she was studying nursing. The domestic she hired is Vincentian, an illegal migrant in Canada. Darlene informed me that she only gives her money to Blacks. The woman had come over to be with her boyfriend but he had another girlfriend by the time she got here. The woman then moved out of his parents home and found out that she was pregnant. She was apprehensive about having an abortion (for reasons discussed in the interview) and so she ended up giving birth to the baby. She had no Medicare coverage so she could not give birth in a hospital. Darlene told me "thank God for the Jews" (knowing I was Jewish) because there was a Jewish doctor who assisted the birth and told her that she could pay him at her convenience. She lives in apartment alone supporting herself and her child. Darlene alluded that the domestic lives off of the meagre salary that she pays

her.

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: Who was the first person in your family to come to Canada and what year was that?

R: My mother, she was here about 12 years before me. She worked as a nurse, she joined her husband, he sponsored her. He's a security guard at the Royal Victoria - he was a policeman. My father is still in Jamaica. He remarried and I grew up with my step family from two months old, but she [the stepmother] died in 1985. My mother was a teacher before she came but because of the culture it wasn't an easy job to get here so she retrained as a nurse at Dawson.

I: What was the motivation for your step father to come over?

R: I don't know because I didn't know them, most likely monetary.

I: What were your impressions before you came over here?

R: I didn't come here to stay for a long time. Just for three years, have an education and return. I was 17 at the time.

I: So what happened?

R: I got married.

I: Where's he from?

R: Haiti.

I: Where did you meet him?

R: At CEGEP. He was trying to learn English.

I: What year did you get married?

R: 1980.

I: What were you studying at Dawson?

R: Social sciences because I wanted to do political science at University. My aim was at that time to go to law school and then return to St. Vincent.

I: So you didn't know your mother then very well when you came?

R: No, my parents separated before I was born, divorced shortly after I was born and my father took custody of me... I had never seen her before.

I: So how did it work out when you came?

R: She wanted to be a mother and I didn't want that. She wanted to pick up from where she left off, but I already had my own mind. I was my own person. She had some sort of guilt. She thought that I felt bad because she left me, and I had no such feelings. So everything I would oppose her on she thought it was because she left. So it was a bit hard but now it's okay.

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community?

R: It's very rare. At that time it's not done. In my mother's case, after her divorce she left St. Vincent and went to Trinidad. Then she came here (because she felt uncomfortable about the divorce). The people then stay married. According to them marriage is ordained by God and it's like a failure...

I: What would be some reasons that people would get a divorce today.

R: There still isn't any. They go through a lot. The main reason they would divorce now is for infidelity but back then no. Even now, they probably wouldn't, it is sort of expected, men are like that...

I: What do you think your marriage would have been like had you still lived in St. Vincent & the Grenadines?

R: It might have been the same because I probably would have married someone like me, but then if you're married there then you probably wouldn't do as much housework as you do here. There hired help is cheap.

I: Do you have a lot of friends here from St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

R: Not really. Most of the people I knew from back home went to Toronto. Four good friends came around the same time, we had graduated together.

I: Tell me about your family, how many relatives do you have in St. Vincent & the Grenadines and how much here?

R: I have my dad, uncles, aunts, cousins in St. Vincent & the Grenadines. My brothers and sisters moved away. I have in my father's family two brothers and one sister, one of my sisters is in Washington married to a lawyer, she's a nurse. My brother is an accountant in Washington, married. When my sister was back home she met a Vincentian who was on vacation back home but living in Washington. Then she went to Virginia to study and they met again. My brother followed her. My other brother is in New York and last time I spoke to him is doing something with computers. He's not married. On my mother's side I have two sisters, one in Texas working as a nurse recruited by an American hospital. My other sister is in Montreal.

I: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived in Montreal. Did anything shock you, etc.

R: I found people were so selfish. At home, my mom and my sister we didn't know each other and just coming from the Caribbean where everyone does everything for others, we help each other out, and here I would go to school and come home and my mother and sister would be there and they made supper or lunch just for them so I would come home and have to make my own. That was something I was not used to... and about borrowing stuff and lending stuff, there is a big emphasis on paying back. There you lend someone a pencil and you don't expect to get it back. Here you do. If you lend someone a quarter,...

I: How did you get along with your sister?

R: We didn't get along, we didn't fight but...

I: How old is she?

R: Two years younger than me. She was an only child and I had to share her space. It started off good but then we just stopped talking, avoiding each other.

I: So where did you meet people?

R: My friends that came over went straight to Toronto but I met other people, Vincentians at Dawson.

I: What about community events?

R: Yes, I went to a few dances and there's a club... but then I was studying and I didn't have time.

I: How did you find out about the events?

R: I went and found out at the West Indian stores...

I: How do you find dealing with the French language here?

R: Language was never my thing and I have a tendency to do things that I do well. I didn't put much emphasis on learning French. My husband is French so I got by. But now I have to do it. Like the hospitals, now French people go to English hospitals...

I: What would the average Vincentian think about intermarriage and what do you think?

R: Personally I think people should not inter marry. They should marry their kind. But there's lots of people who don't believe that, you should marry who you love. It's very easy to love your kind, when you marry someone who is like you, the way you problem solve is the same, your social life,... to me it's much better. Not only that but you lose your culture, the children are neither here nor there, neither Black or White.

I: What are the differences though among Blacks?

R: There's Black Africans, Black West Indians, Black Americans, and we're all different. There's still something there but, for example, my husband and I are from different cultures. He's Haitian. His parents are very Haitian, he grew up here but he's got the culture down. He speaks Creole, the food is different and I had a hard time because for one, his parents believe that Haitian should marry Haitian for the food and everything. But apart from that we do things almost the same. Well, the food is the same but the way of cooking it is different. It's basically rice and peas with a different combination of spices. Their music is different, they move to it differently. There's more Spanish to it. We dance loose and they dance always in pairs.

I: And African Blacks don't like to intermarry?

R: No, they marry Africans. A few of them inter marry either Whites or West Indians but should they return home it hardly ever works. So they would end up taking another wife or you end up leaving. American Blacks are viewed by us West Indians as lazy. West Indian people are very hard working. They

would come to a new country. A lot of people come illegally. It's very hard to get a job. If you're a woman most likely you get a job in a factory or as a house cleaner. It's upward mobility, they get their papers, most of them return to school and move their way up. West Indians see them as lazy because they have opportunity but may be on welfare. That's a no no for a West Indian. They prefer to clean houses or whatever... They wouldn't talk about being on welfare.

I: Do you ever get together with Vincentians or involve your children in things specifically Vincentian or, Caribbean?

R: It's more Caribbean, it doesn't matter because it's all similar. I have them go to school on Saturdays, the Garvey Institute, to teach them about the culture and also to teach them English because they go to French school... The Canadian Blacks [those born in Canada having ancestors here from several centuries or decades before] are different from the West Indians, we see them as more White than Black. They don't have much of a culture. (The Garvey Institute was started by Caribbean Blacks).

I: Do your kids get any other type of cultural education?

R: From us. Christenings, weddings,... At a Caribbean baptism it's the same as others except for the music and the food. My kids should know how to cook Caribbean foods but hopefully they'll have a Caribbean wife, somebody to cook Caribbean food... We play calypsos and reggae and came (Haitian music) in the home.

I: Are you a member of any clubs or associations?

R: Not right now but I do support the Vincentian association and the Garvey Institute.

I: Are you a religious family?

R: Yes, church two Sundays a month, Pentecostal. In town, Union United. I was looking for a church not too White or anything else, multicultural and that fit right in, a friend introduced me.

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

R: Three times.

I: Have you sponsored any relatives to come here?

R: No.

I: How many friends do you have that are not Black?

R: Quite a bit, at work, school, my children's friends parents...

I: Would you ever consider moving elsewhere, back to the isles,...

R: Yes, I'd live anywhere in the Caribbean. I like the life. It's not as cheap as it was when I grew up but apart from that the life is really what I like. Simple, stress free, people close for lunch, few people die from heart attacks.

I: Is it a plan you've seriously considered doing with your husband?

R: He'd love to go, if he had money, anytime. I could live anywhere but my

preference would be the Caribbean.

I: Are your grandparents alive?

R: No.

I: How well did you know your husband before you married him?

R: Two years.

I: What's his occupation?

R: He's a part time teacher and he owns his own business as a jeweler.

I: How did he get into that business?

R: He was working part time while he was going to school but he couldn't get a job teaching full time so he started a business on his own. He has an MA in languages (French, English, Creole Spanish).

I: Has living in Montreal had any effect on your family life, or have you remained a typical Caribbean family?

R: It's not really a typical Caribbean family - it's a blend of Caribbean, Canadian and we have lots of friends from different places so we sort of adapt. And then we have kids too who are not really Caribbean so that's an entity on its own. They don't always see your way or accept discipline Caribbean style.

I: What would a typical family be like in the Caribbean?

R: Mother, father and six, seven kids. There wouldn't be as much as stress, because of hired help,...

I: Would you be working?

R: Yes, everyone works now. When I was growing up you have a mother at home,... When I was growing up there was maybe one day care in St. Vincent because people stayed home with their kids, or a sister, grandmother,... Now you have more. The problem is that some grandparents come away to help with kids [meaning, grandparents are going to help take care of kids in Canada, the U.S. etc.]

I: You were telling me about where you work in the Palliative care unit, that it was difficult for you to work there originally because of your spiritual beliefs in the West Indies?

R: Death is looked on differently there. There's lots of stories, like the afterlife,... You don't get in much contact with the dead, there's something mystic and scary about it, the dead have powers to do good and bad, zombies,... One of my first things to do was to be alone with a dead body, to clean up and wrapping the dead was really an experience. Even though you're educated,... It's the same for all islands but some people take it more seriously than others. Like in Haiti, there's voodoo which could be a culture or religion. Instead of taking someone to court if they do something bad, they settle it with voodoo and supposedly it works.

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

R: It's not such a big deal in the Caribbean like in North America. When I

came here there was a big thing over women's rights, they should do this, that,...In the Caribbean woman are pretty liberated, they do just about everything, they're in charge. They run the home, they're in control, men take care of the kids, men cook, women work in the fields,...

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Tell me about your kids.

R: Oldest boy 12, next 7 and next 3 and only daughter 6 months.

I: Do you want to have more children?

R: No. When I was in nursing school I had three children and that was what I was going to have. I didn't have a tubal ligation, I was using the IUD, I went to registration and I really wasn't feeling well. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I thought it was the flu so I went to the doctor and they said everything is fine and I should take a pregnancy test. I didn't agree because I had protection. I was pregnant for the whole year of nursing. I contemplated quitting but then I'd have to wait a whole year again. The second semester I had to stop for a week, have the baby and finish the semester. I had to do my exams and then do my stage.

I: How did you handle all that with three kids as well?

R: I got pretty organised. I had two kids in school and [my son] was in day care and I didn't have a heavy course load. I knew I was having a Caesarean but I didn't tell anyone because they might have thought I was crazy to come back a week later to work in a hospital...

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

R: Basically, just a good education. That's the basic and then they can take it from there. I have tried to give my kids the best education. I put them in public school originally but then took them out because I don't think the system here is for Black people. Our kids have a very hard time, become disinterested and drop out. You pay for what you get. It's very expensive for me but my two sons go to private school.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: It depends on the child.

I: Does your spouse have different aspirations for your children than you do?

R: No, the same. My husband would probably be a little more protective over my daughter than I would be because he thinks that a girl should not have a lot of experience before they get married. I think that she should have as much experience as possible.

I: What about disciplining practices?

R: Basically the same. We try anything that works. Some children, you talk to them and they listen. Other kids you have to spank them and I do believe in spanking.

I: Do your kids play any of the same games or sing the same songs that you did in St. Vincent?

R: Yes, but there's a lot of them here anyway because they're English, like "Row Row your Boat," "London Bridge is Falling Down,"...

I: Where do you hope your children meet potential spouses?

R: Through friends, community. There's lots of opportunity for them to meet other Black people. We go on vacation to visit our family,...

I: When do you usually get together with your family?

R: Every occasion, every holiday. My sister and brother came up with friends in August and we're going to Washington for Christmas and we'll be with other family members there. We haven't had [baby daughter's] baptism yet because we can't find a time when everybody will be able to come so it might be around Christmas, in Washington, we haven't decided.

I: Have your kids been back to St. Vincent?

R: Two of them have been. My father has come to visit every year since I've come. He travels a lot. He goes to New York for business and when he goes there he comes here.

I: What was the last occasion that you all got together on?

R: At the summer get together.

I: What about celebrating Vincentian Independence Day?

R: Yes.

I: What's the date of that?

R: I don't remember, it's in October. Usually they have a dinner and dance but not on the day, it's usually on a Saturday.

I: What other Vincentian things do you celebrate?

R: We have things around carnival time like dances, picnics.

I: When?

R: June, July. Carnival is really in February, the time after... it's a time to let loose before Ash Wednesday (before Lent). But it became not very profitable because it was something that would attract tourism and the big carnivals are in Rio and Trinidad and they would attract tourism at the same time. So St. Vincent changed the time to the summer...

I: If you could imagine your boys in some ideal career, what lifestyles would you like to see them in?

R: It doesn't matter, anything that they're happy with but I'd like to see them in something in the helping profession, like the health field or research. It's my own bias because I'm in that field too but it's something for the future really, for money and they will always have a job because there's always a need.

I: What about your daughter?

R: I hope she has a career but even she chooses to marry and have kids that's

okay too. But I still want her to have a career.

I: What kind of career?

R: Anything marketable, that brings in money, and that's she's happy with, in the helping field as well.

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

R: I should hope so.

I: In terms of talking about sex with your kids... have you already talked with your kids about it?

R: Definitely, all of them. They know the basics. He would ask me "Mum when people are having sex does the penis go in the vagina?" and then my oldest son would say, "Well, don't forget, you have to use a condom"... Many of the families I spoke to were shy about talking about sex. That's never been a thing with Caribbean people. Sex is pretty much open. There's some people in every society that's a little bit closed but in the Caribbean you see it around you.

I: What do you mean?

R: It's not as if everything is hidden behind closed doors. Everybody knows everyone's business, including sex.

I: Who do your kids talk to about general concerns?

R: My son would talk to one of us or both of us.

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

R: It's not a good thing, put it that way. We pray and wish it's something that doesn't happen because that's not something Caribbean people deal very well with. If there is they usually are in the closet.

I: How is abortion looked upon in Vincentian society?

R: Not very good. It's bad, not necessary, killing, ungodly and shouldn't be done.

I: What about when Vincentians come here?

R: It's changed, but they wouldn't talk about it.

I: Would a daughter tell her parents if she were to do it?

R: I don't think so, maybe or maybe not. Some people think it's just as bad to have a child without being married. It happens [unwed pregnancy], but people look down on it and a lot of men don't like to marry girls who have had children. So a West Indian mother would probably encourage a daughter to have an abortion in that respect but then nobody would know about it.

I: Do you think that your mother and father hope for the same things for your kids?

R: The same.

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

R: The discipline and respect for older people. The elderly are not really respected here. It's not a good thing to be old here. In the Caribbean we look to the elderly for advice..

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: Let's say your parents were no longer able to live by themselves, would they come to live with you?

R: If they wanted. It would be better than living in a nursing home.

I: Are there nursing homes in St. Vincent?

R: No, ...there's one. They would go to live with relatives or live in their own home with relatives.

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

R: Yes, my father took care of my mum. She had her own home but when my father divorced we lived with my grandmother. Then my father got married and we moved but I would go to my grandmother for weekends and she would visit. When she got old she moved into our house. She died when I was about 12.

I: If times ever got tough for your family, would you consider moving back with your parents?

R: Personally me no. But some people do.

I: Did your father ever help you and your husband financially?

R: Yes. You try not to but if you do ask then you get and they know that you need help.

I: What about other relatives, do you help each other out?

R: Yes, me and my sister from Texas,...

I: What responsibilities do you have toward your parents in terms of visits...

R: We visit my husband's parents once a week, since we're busy now it's only on Sundays.

I: How do you decide which parents to get together with on holidays?

R: Christmas I go to my mother. Always. On Christmas Eve we go to my husband's family because it's more important to them and Christmas day is more important to us.

I: Do you get together with a large family on your husband's side?

R: Yes, cousins with children, aunts and uncles.

I: Do your kids see their cousins regularly?

R: Yes, they go to the same school.

V. RELATIONS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

I: How often do you speak with relatives?

R: Regular, I have big, big Bell Canada bills.

I: Is there anyone in your family that takes responsibility for keeping people together, like for that reunion in the summer?

R: It could be just about anyone. We take turns.

I: What are the main attitudes of Vincentians toward the family?

R: Family first, put it that way.

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

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

R: I really don't know. They're always moving from St. Vincent,...

I: Before you came what were your impressions about integrating into Montreal: Did you feel you would be joining the greater Montreal community or a transplanted Black community?

R: I didn't even think there were much Afro Caribbeans here. I thought it was going to be all White so I was very surprised, impressed and happy that there was such a diverse city.

I: Did you ever encounter racism?

R: Not overtly. But I encounter it everyday, but I can deal with it when it's subtle.

I: Do you think that Vincentians face any obstacles in Canada or are they doing okay?

R: They're doing okay but an obstacle would probably be the language problem.

I: What do you think about other communities in Montreal, other Black communities, White communities... any competition?

R: Not really. We're so small that it's not...

I: Are there any reputations that the islands have that you refer to in Canada?

R: Yes, I don't know for St. Vincent because we always know about other people... If someone is a loud mouth then he's Jamaican,... Vincentians are usually mild mannered, Trinidadians like to party, the Guyanese, we talk about their cooking. Barbarians... we call them little Britain.

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

R: Oh yes, it has changed. As a Vincentian, Black person you can get just about whatever you can get in your country even in the major stores, things like plantain, coconut and hair products in Cumberland.

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

R: Carnival, many based around the way we celebrate Christmas, Baptisms...

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

R: When I went home to visit I think they are better off than me, financially, they're more stable. There if you have a good job then you're okay. Here, if you have a good job, you have to work hard to keep up, the bills, there's clothes for every season, the electricity, heat,.... In St. Vincent there's one season. It's no good for the very poor people but once you get to middle or upper it's quite good.

I: Who do look toward for leadership of your community, inspirationally, from the past or present, international,....?

R: Dr. Eric Williams. He was very liberal. He was interested in the Caribbean common market. Had those ideas gone through and survived I think the Caribbean would have been better off.

I: Would St. Vincent & Grenadines lose some of its cultural character?

R: No, it wouldn't lose it and really there's not much difference among the islands.

I: Are Vincentians an ethnic group or do they consider themselves foremost West Indian?

R: There's more unity in the Caribbean except for the French speaking islands. Some islands are advanced economically, but basically it's the same thing. Some are more Americanised than others while St. Vincent is unspoiled...

I: What if the island associations in Montreal decided to pool their resources?

R: They do that already.... But even with confederation (in the Caribbean), we have water separating the islands and the physical barrier prevents total assimilation.

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

R: That's it, Black. It's a colour, a race, it's us. I belong to the Black race, Black culture. Then again, Black comes in many shades. You're not Black just because of your colour. It's culture, family, blood.

I: If you had to describe to a stranger who you were in terms of your character, background, etc. in a few words what would you say?

R: First I'd tell them my name, where I'm from (West Indies), I'm Vincentian, born there, immigrated to Canada.

I: But who are you as an individual?

R: Look at me, I'm Black and I'm the type of person who thinks the Black culture and Black race is in danger. I think Black people should really put more emphasis on themselves, better education, focus on the family,...

I: Is that something you always felt?

R: I always felt that because that's what it is there, we marry Black. There are White Vincentians but they're Vincentian anyway. But here you lose yourself, especially the children. I find they are so lost. They call them mulattos. It's the worse thing for Black people to be called mulatto because you're neither here nor there. When they're not accepted by Black they try to fit in with White and they don't fit in.