*Journal of British Studies* (2025), **64**, e60, 1–24
doi:10.1017/jbr.2025.10122

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

# Composing and Narrating Black Memories of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Jamaica and England in 1990s Birmingham

George J. Severs

Gender Centre, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland
Email: george.severs@graduateinstitute.ch

## Abstract

This article examines the ways in which sexual and reproductive health themes appear in the Birmingham Black Oral History Project. As a community Black oral history project, it did not set out to collect memories of sexual or reproductive health. Despite that, the collection offers rich insights into the underexplored place of sexual and reproductive health within Black British histories. The article argues that archived oral history interviews should be "reused" as part of that historiographical exploration. It analyses the ways in which dominant interest in questions of "illegitimacy"—interest that had colonial roots—led to memories of sex education, courtship, and access to abortion in mid-twentieth-century Jamaica. Through a case study analysis of one interviewee—Carlton Duncan, father to the first "Black test tube twins"—the article concludes by arguing that being attentive to interviewee composure makes more visible the availability of narratives and cultural discourses through which interviewees could narrate or shape their sexual and reproductive health histories. As a whole, the article offers a new lens on postcolonial British history by analyzing the racist stereotyping that endured across the postwar period, especially in relation to Black sexuality and fertility.

In the early 1990s, a group of historians, volunteers, and activists were busy collecting oral histories of Birmingham's Black communities. Under the leadership of Ranjit Sondhi, a youth and community worker who had arrived in Birmingham in 1965 from India, the Birmingham Black Oral History Project (BBOHP) was a community initiative that set out to capture the experiences of local Black people.[1] Doreen Price, a white woman around the age of seventy who had been working in the region as an oral historian since at least 1979, was the BBOHP's lead interviewer.[2] Focusing mainly on "the older generations of people who arrived in Birmingham in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s," the BBOHP aimed "to collect, preserve and disseminate spoken history of Birmingham's Black" communities.[3] The project resulted in tens of hours of recorded and transcribed interviews with twenty-five

[1] Asian Youth Culture Oral History: Ranjit Sondhi, https://asianyouthculture.co.uk/oral-histories/ranjit-sondhi/.

[2] "Oral History Society Regional Day School: Birmingham," *Oral History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 6; "West Midlands Oral History Group," *Oral History* 15, no. 2 (1987): 12.

[3] Birmingham Black Oral History Project folder, DA6/3/2, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (hereafter CRL).

people, a book and accompanying cassette tape of selected audio clips, and a play adapted from the interviews that toured the country in 2000.[4]

The BBOHP has informed some histories of migration, education, diasporas, and "race relations," topics of particular interest to scholars of Black communities.[5] Yet despite this wealth of interview material, historians have been slow to draw on the archive for insights into other topics of importance to gain an understanding of postwar Britain. For example, unlike other similar collections, issues around sexual and reproductive health (SRH) feature prominently in the BBOHP.[6] As such, the interviews provide novel insights into the ways in which SRH was experienced and narrated by people of color in postwar, postcolonial Britain.

In recent years, historians have drawn attention to the distinctive and divergent ways in which racialized people experienced their SRH in postwar Britain, and the ways in which many were racialized through their sexual and reproductive healthcare.[7] Sources informing these historical experiences, however, are thin on the ground. Anne Hanley has argued that historians "need to find new ways of writing about these important health histories, such as through the collecting of oral histories, that prioritize the communities whose unique and complex experiences have been sidelined in the written archives."[8] Thus attention has turned recently to the collection of new oral histories of race and SRH.[9] Underpinning these efforts is an assumption that existing archives do not speak to these histories and experi-

[4] Doreen Price and Ravi Thiara, eds., *The Land of Money? Personal Accounts by Post-War Black Migrants to Birmingham* (Birmingham City Council, 1992); "The Land of Money?," audio cassette recording, DA6/3/1, CRL. On the play, see David Mander, "Special, Local and About Us: The Development of Community Archives in Britain," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander (Routledge, 2009), 37.

[5] Examples of studies that have drawn on the BBOHP include Richard Gale, "Between the City Lines: Towards a Spatial Historiography of British Asian Birmingham," in *Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas*, ed. Seán McLoughlin et al. (Routledge, 2014); Lauri Johnson, "Interpreting Historical Responses to Racism by UK Black and South Asian Headteachers through the Lens of Generational Consciousness," in *Educational Leadership: Theorising Professional Practice in Neoliberal Times*, ed. Steven Courtney et al. (Routledge, 2019); Jessica Gerrard, "Self Help and Protest: The Emergence of Black Supplementary Schooling in England," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 1 (2013): 32–58; Darshan S. Tatla, "A Passage to England: Oral Tradition and Popular Culture among Early Punjabi Settlers in Britain," *Oral History* 30, no. 2 (2002): 61–72; Rachel Yemm, "Immigration, Race, and Local Media in the Midlands: 1960–1985" (PhD diss., University of Lincoln, 2018); Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Routledge, 2006), 211; and, briefly, David Cowan, *Politics of the Past: Inter-war Memories and the Making of British Popular Politics, 1939–2009* (Cambridge, 2024), 213.

[6] The World Health Organization defines SRH as "a broad range of services that cover access to contraception, fertility and infertility care, maternal and perinatal health, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), protection from sexual and gender-based violence, and education on safe and healthy relationships." World Health Organization, "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights," https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights.

[7] See Anne Hanley, "Migration, Racism and Sexual Health in Postwar Britain," *History Workshop Journal* 94 (2022): 202–22; Caroline Rusterholz and Laura Kelly, "Depo-Provera, Class, Race, and the Domiciliary Family Planning Services in Glasgow and Haringey, 1970–1983," *Historical Journal* 68, no. 1 (2025): 216–38; George J. Severs, *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), ch. 5; Caroline Rusterholz, "Reproductive Justice in Postwar Britain, 1950s–2020s," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary British History*, ed. Sarah Kenny and Sarah Crook (Routledge, forthcoming).

[8] Hanley "Migration, Racism and Sexual Health," 216.

[9] See, for example, Caitlin Lambert, "'The Objectionable Injectable': Recovering the Lost History of the WLM through the Campaign Against Depo-Provera," *Women's History Review* 29, no. 3 (2019): 520–39, at 522 and 534; and for an earlier (and wider) call for oral history work to nuance SRH histories, see Anne Hanley, "Histories of 'a Loathsome Disease': Sexual Health in Modern Britain," *History Compass* 20, no. 3 (2022): 1–16, at 8. At the University of Birmingham, Hanley leads the Histories of Sexual Health in Britain project, which is collecting such narratives as part of a wider oral history project, while at the Geneva Graduate Institute, the RE:SHARE team led by Caroline Rusterholz is conducting a dedicated oral history collection centered on race and SRH.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ences. However, several recent studies suggest that existing oral archives house rich SRH narratives, offering fruitful avenues for research in this area.[10]

This scholarship makes clear the merits of "reusing" oral history. Oral history reuse, also referred to as secondary analysis, hinges on the evaluation of archived interviews, usually conducted by another practitioner and often with a different intellectual purpose.[11] Revisiting interviews in relation to narratives of SRH provides an opportunity to explore the impacts of healthcare interventions from a wider vantage point than that provided in documentary evidence, which tends to record the medical encounter, its preceding "logics," or its immediate aftermaths in isolation. More broadly, archived oral histories offer historians a range of new and dynamic avenues of analysis, perhaps especially when examined with questions that were not central to the initial oral history encounter. Reuse of the BBOHP is particularly illuminating for scholars of both SRH and Black British experiences as these interviews highlight the place of SRH in the construction of the Black self in postwar Britain. They reveal that narratives of SRH were shaped by enduring colonial logics and racist stereotypes, further illuminating what Jordanna Bailkin has called "the afterlife of empire."[12]

## SRH in the Birmingham Black Oral History Project

The BBOHP was a community oral history project supported through "collaboration" with Birmingham City Council's Race Relations Unit.[13] Both national and local government had long been involved in Black community organizing and research, with Birmingham City Council among the most active.[14] Race relations research, as Rob Waters has argued, often functioned on less democratizing and consensual principles than "social democratic sociology," research that developed in parallel to "state-sponsored research" focused on communities of color.[15] Race relations researchers "consistently narrated the migrant other as a 'stranger'," but research undertaken beyond that remit was also critiqued for its racialized assumptions.[16] As Lisa Amanda Palmer has argued, "white sociologists" working in Handsworth (a Birmingham neighborhood subject to considerable interrogation by researchers and the media alike from the 1960s onwards) "were failing to question the most obvious common-sense racialized assumptions found in their own analysis that paralleled the common-sense racism in circulation within popular British media discourses

[10] Caroline Rusterholz, *Responsible Pleasure: The Brook Advisory Centres and Youth Sexuality in Postwar Britain* (Oxford, 2024), esp. 20; Severs, *Radical Acts*; Laura King, "Hiding in the Pub to Cutting the Cord? Men's Presence at Childbirth in Britain c.1940s–2000s," *Social History of Medicine* 30, no. 2 (2017): 389–407; Jessica White, "Black Women's Groups, Life Narratives, and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain," *Historical Journal* 65, no. 3 (2022): 797–817. A further productive example is Tanya Evans and Pat Thane's reuse of archived social science interviews with unmarried mothers, even though the interviews were not oral histories (and SRH not the pair's focus). See Tanya Evand and Pat Thane, "Secondary Analysis of Dennis Marsden *Mothers Alone*," *Methodological Innovations Online* 1, no. 2 (2006): 78–82.

[11] See, for example, Andrea Althaus et al., "Tuning In: Emotions, Relations, and Dynamics in the Analysis of an Archived Interview," *Oral History Review* 51, no. 1 (2024): 136–54; and Joanna Bornat, "Secondary Analysis in Reflection: Some Experiences of Re-use from an Oral History Perspective," *Families, Relationships and Societies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 309–17.

[12] Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (California, 2012).

[13] Gale, "Between the City Lines," 128.

[14] Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* (California, 2019), 22.

[15] Rob Waters, "Race, Citizenship and 'Race Relations' Research in Late Twentieth-Century Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 3 (2023): 491–514, at 513.

[16] Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers' in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963," *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (1997): 207–38, at 209.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on race."[17] As such, it is important to attend to the ways in which projects like BBOHP understood Blackness, and to remain alert to the presence of racial prejudices, even in an overtly anti-racist project.

The BBOHP's organizing team explained that it understood "Black" as "African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian."[18] This definition accords with ideas of "political Blackness" that, as Waters maintains, "was frequently used to speak of an alliance of non-white people seeking to end racism and transform British society."[19] Understandings of political Blackness—which saw people with "West Indian," South Asian, and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds "thinking Black" as a diverse but common political entity—had been well established for at least a decade before the formation of BBOHP.[20] Such political thinking had never been hegemonic. Around the same time as the BBOHP was conducting its interviews, scholars such as Tariq Modood were critiquing the notion of political Blackness on the grounds that it had been imposed upon British Asians as a political concept and served to obscure the racism to which they, in particular, were subjected.[21] Kieran Connell has identified the "fragmentation of political identities" in Birmingham that formed around diverse understandings of race and ethnicity, while also identifying that political Blackness and "Black globality" were rendered "both intelligible and, in the eyes of many, a political necessity" by the specific local context.[22] This was especially so in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Handsworth, where the BBOHP was based.[23]

The BBOHP was made up of volunteers and several paid members of staff who conducted and transcribed interviews, arranged publicity, and administered the project.[24] Its approach to interviewee recruitment varied; the project team hoped that a physical presence in Handsworth would foster "liaison with the public," but most interviewees were invited directly, especially those who had stories of achievement or success to relay.[25] Although the project's lead interviewer was white, its staff of volunteers was majority Black and South Asian.[26] They understood this as productive for their project. Researchers in the early 1990s were actively discussing the practical, political, and epistemological impacts of "mixed race studies," with feminists especially interested in the impact of white women interviewing Black women.[27] While many argued against such practices because they tended to operate from Eurocentric worldviews and reproduce colonially rooted racist paradigms, others saw benefits to cross-cultural research collaborations provided white researchers could relate

[17] Lisa Amanda Palmer, "'Each One Teach One': Visualising Black Intellectual Life in Handsworth beyond the Epistemology of 'White Sociology'," *Identities* 27, no. 1 (2020): 91–113, at 94. On media scrutiny of Handsworth, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1978).

[18] See, for example, Birmingham Black Oral History Project leaflet, DA6/3/2, CRL.

[19] Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (California, 2019), 53.

[20] Waters, *Thinking Black*, 76–79.

[21] Tariq Madood, "Political Blackness and British Asians," *Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1994): 859–76.

[22] Connell, *Black Handsworth*, 21–22.

[23] The BBOHP was based at 70 Villa Road, Handsworth, the same road on which the Asian Resource Centre had been founded in 1976. Ranjit Sondhi co-founded both organizations. See Connell, *Black Handsworth*, 38; and Birmingham Black Oral History Project leaflet, publicity info and photos, DA6/3/2, CRL; Richard Vinen, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain* (Penguin Books, 2022), 428, see also 287–349 and 431–32.

[24] Price and Thiara, eds., *Land of Money?*, 40.

[25] Siobhan B. Nunes, "Birmingham Black Oral History Project," 10 January 1991, DA6/4/1, CRL. This document was more focused on the "dissemination of material," but speaks to the project's desire to attract members of various local communities to volunteer for interviews. I am grateful to Ravi Thiara for discussing the BBOHP's recruitment strategies with me.

[26] As the project's work was mostly supported by volunteers, the makeup of the team changed over time. For much of its duration, the BBOHP's paid staff were Samera Charles and Ravi Thiara. See Price and Thiara, eds., *Land of Money?*.

[27] Rosalind Edwards, "Connecting Method and Epistemology: A White Woman Interviewing Black Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, no. 5 (1990): 477–90, at 482.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

**Figure 1.** (From left to right) Samera Charles, Doreen Price, Ranjit Sondhi, Ravi Thiara, Mel Thompson, and Geoff Wilkins pictured working at the BBOHP premises on Villa Road, Handsworth. Photograph taken by Ranjit Sondhi, DA6/3/6, CRL.

to Black interviewees "in subjective ways on their own terms."[28] Archived photographs, such as Figure 1, suggest friendly, positive working relationships and a supportive, collaborative culture.[29] If these impressions are mirrored in the reflections of several BBOHP volunteers, they also remembered Price's potential to "raise hackles" with questions or statements that betrayed a lack of insight into several historic and contemporary issues facing her racialized interviewees.[30] Indeed, the racialized experiences of SRH embedded within the BBOHP interviews can only be fully understood by acknowledging and unpacking the ways in which both the Black interviewee and the white interviewer, and the dynamic between them, shaped the resulting recording.

The aims of the BBOHP were multiple and were not solely focused on the documentation of racism. One project document, written by a worker of color, argued that "the negative aspects of racism must be balanced with an approach to the Black cultures which is positive and enriching."[31] The BBOHP thus solicited interviews from some leading local figures. Although the project's focus on race and its work within a racist climate resulted in the recording of many memories of racism, its focus and the resulting oral histories were more complex and nuanced recollections. This allows historians to hear both racialized SRH experiences *and* the ways in which interviewees placed SRH memories within metanarratives of race and racism.

Political Blackness informed more than just the makeup of the group; it also informed their understanding of oral history. Anticipating the question "what is oral history" from

[28] Edwards, "Connecting Method and Epistemology," 489.

[29] "Photographs," DA6/3/6, CRL.

[30] Telephone conversation with Ranjit Sondhi, 16 August 2024; online conversation with Ravi Thiara, 3 February 2025, with the quote coming from my conversation with Thiara.

[31] Nunes, "Birmingham Black Oral History Project."

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

both its volunteers and members of the public, the group penned an answer that appeared in staff training documents and publicity material. "Very simply" they explained, "oral history is a living memory of the past preserved through the vocal tradition."[32] The emphasis on "vocal tradition" is significant. As Alex Haley has highlighted, the oral tradition of storytelling is a marked feature of several Black historical traditions. Haley draws on African American family stories of enslavement and West African

> griots, who are in effect walking, living archives of oral history. They are the old men who, from the time they had been in their teen-ages, have been part of a long line of men who tell the stories as they have been told since the time of their forefathers, literally down across centuries.[33]

The BBOHP was not necessarily attempting to tap into an unbroken narrative line, though, as Mary Chamberlain has suggested in relation to her work with Caribbean interviewees, "family memory creates an ethos which shapes the lives of its members" further down the generational or collective line.[34] Their interest was more firmly in the recent past, particularly postwar migration to Birmingham. Despite this, and their seemingly more formally institutionalized oral history training, their emphasis on "vocal tradition" highlights both an intellectual and political position. Black political movements in Britain, as elsewhere, placed great emphasis on "recording and making accessible" histories of Black experiences, especially resistance to racial oppression.[35] It was in this spirit that the BBOHP set out to conduct their interviews in the early 1990s.

The BBOHP collected life histories, "In-depth biographical interviews ... conducted over several sessions and many hours."[36] In adopting this approach, the project sought to record the experiences of interviewees' lives from their earliest memories through to the moment of the interview itself. The ways in which interviewees recalled their childhoods and education offer the first kernel of interest to historians of SRH, as interviewees were often asked for or volunteered information about their memories of family structure and gendered experiences of socialization at school. These themes are particularly apparent in interviewees with Jamaican heritage. Price displayed a keen interest in the apparently high levels of "illegitimacy" in the "West Indies." It is unclear where this interest came from. Ranjit Sondhi, who was interviewed for the project that he chaired, recalled Price fondly as a kind, friendly woman and a talented interviewer. He did not remember any discussions about illegitimacy as a West Indian "problem" within the project, which suggests that it was Price herself who initiated this line of inquiry.[37]

[32] "What is Oral History?," publicity info and photos, DA6/3/2, CRL.

[33] Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 2016), 28.

[34] Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (Routledge, 2005), 51.

[35] See, for example, the Ethnic Communities Oral History Project, 1984–1994, ORAL/7, Black Cultural Archives (hereafter BCA); and the Black Women Oral History Project, undated (1980s), 5/1/47, BCA.

[36] Rob Perks and Mary Stewart, "Editorial Introduction," *Oral History* 52, no. 3 (2024), Special issue: The Life Story in Oral History Practice: 2–4, at 2. See this entire special issue for detailed reflections on life history interviews.

[37] These reflections come from a telephone conversation I had with Ranjit Sondhi in August 2024. More information may appear in the future, when the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) Archive, which holds further archival material relating to the BBOHP, is available for public access. At present, this is not the case. On the relationship between the BBOHP and the BMAG, see "West Midlands Oral History Group"; and Pam Taylor, "West Midlands Oral History Group," *Oral History* 8, no. 2 (1980): 18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Illegitimacy was a marked concern for imperial authorities in the Caribbean, and acted as one factor among others that served to create "African-Caribbean families … as the mirror opposite of the 'ideal' family advocated by the white, colonial authorities."[38] Price's interest in questions of illegitimacy reveals an enduring colonial fascination with "West Indian" sexual morality. Such interest, and the ways in which questions around illegitimacy were raised, appear at odds with what is known of Price's politics and those of the BBOHP. The paradoxical nature of these questions speaks to the complex ways in which questions of "race" functioned in a multicultural city during a "postcolonial" period. The anti-racist politics of the BBOHP could serve to mask the ways in which colonial and racist stereotypes surfaced during its research. Identifying, analyzing, and historicizing such moments are vital, however, to a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial Britain, a society in which the legacies of colonialism reverberated not only in right-wing or reactionary circles, but in progressive and explicitly anti-racist organizations as well.[39]

Price's interest in illegitimacy is apparent in her interview with Ryland Campbell, pictured in Figure 2. Born in St Thomas, Jamaica, in 1932, his family was largely agricultural. His grandfather worked felling trees, likely as part of the logwood trade.[40] Shortly after starting her interview with Campbell, Price asked "do you think you were illegitimate?" When Campbell confirmed her suspicions, stating "that's right," Price probed further, couching a statement in the form of a question: "there's a lot in the West Indies wasn't there?" Price's query could have directed Campbell into simply agreeing with her. Instead, he took the opportunity to offer a critique rooted in a postcolonial analysis of Jamaican imperial history. Illegitimacy, he claimed, was not a "product of that [i.e. Jamaican] society" but rather of the British imperial economy that relied on enslaved labor.[41] He argued that "illegitimacy is a frowned word in England but they had created it in the West Indies," invoking the enduring legacy of slavery on Black reproductive bodies.[42]

As Stella Dadzie and others have shown, enslaved women's reproductive potential was a source of constant concern for their enslavers. Either they were viewed as reproducing too rapidly, increasing the risk of slave revolts, or they were seen as reproducing too slowly, reducing the "stock" of enslaved labor.[43] Enslavers attempted to regulate the reproductive health and caring networks of the women they enslaved in an effort to maintain and expand their system of racial capitalism.[44] As enslavers and the British imperial government navigated these colonial concerns, ideas about birth and family patterns, including legitimacy, were exported to, and entrenched in, Jamaica's plantation economy. Abolitionists also played a significant part in this export of normative morality around marriage and family patterns, "encouraging monogamous marriages" as a means of "resolv[ing] the problem of

[38] Mary Chamberlain, *Family Love in the Diaspora: Migration and the Anglo-Caribbean Experience* (Transaction Publishers, 2006), 4.

[39] Rob Waters, *Colonized by Humanity: Caribbean London and the Politics of Integration at the End of Empire* (Oxford, 2023), 239.

[40] Ryland A. Campbell interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 1, tr. pp. 2–3, BBOHP PT3, CRL; Gisela Eisner, *Jamaica, 1830–1930: A Study in Economic Growth* (Manchester, 1961), 255.

[41] Ryland A. Campbell interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 1, tr. pp. 2–3, BBOHP PT3, CRL. This argument was echoed by peer research conducted in the early 1980s in Handsworth. See Pauline Davies, "Trapped: Unmarried West Indian Mothers in Handsworth," *Papers on Community and Youth Work* 2 (Westhill College Department of Community and Youth Work, Selly Oak, Birmingham: March 1983): 5–7.

[42] Ryland A. Campbell interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 1, tr. p. 3, BBOHP PT3, CRL.

[43] Stella Dadzie, *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance* (Verso, 2020), 31–32 and 57–59.

[44] Diana Paton, "Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery: On Racial Capitalism and Social Reproduction," *American History Review* 127, no. 2 (2022): 726–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

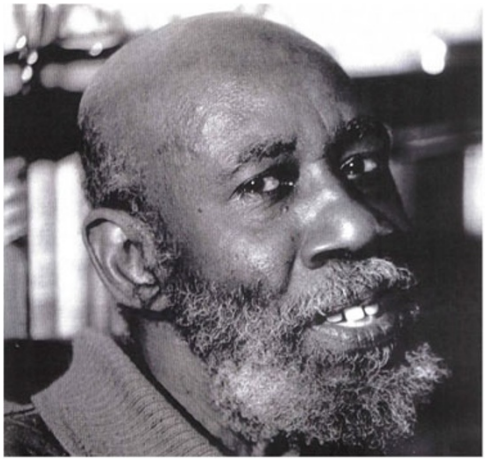

**Figure 2.** Ryland Campbell. © Kate Green, Birmingham Black Oral History Project.

female infertility and low birthrates" as well as to mitigate against the "moral and social costs" associated with illegitimacy.[45]

In other interviews, Price did ask more explicitly about SRH. This was the case during an interview with Sakiina Haaruun, pictured in Figure 3. Haaruun had been born in Jamaica in 1952 and changed her name from Clover Smith when she converted to Islam in the mid-1980s.[46] Having asked Haaruun about "alternative medicine" and "the old witch doctors," statements that further reveal her exoticist stereotyping of Jamaican life, Price then asked whether, by her early teenage years, "were you taught anything about or had you become aware of sex?"[47] That these questions fused the quasi-medical with the sexual may have been an opportunity for memories of contraception, abortion, or sexual health to emerge. Haaruun, though, took the question literally, answering that she "certainly [had] the awareness of ... the difference between male/female," but "not sex in the sense of active sexual ... experimentation."[48] For Haaruun, information about sex and reproduction was strictly limited. Her knowledge about sexual difference emerged from her lived reality as a young woman in a Jamaica that she recalled as being socially divided along gendered lines. This resulted in both a single-sex social life and a lack of education about sexuality, reproduction, and sexual health.

Here, too, Price steered the conversation towards questions of illegitimacy, which she appeared to link to youthful sexuality. "Where I actually come from" Haaruun explained, "I've never actually known of any very young people who do have children."[49] This was

[45] Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Pennsylvania, 2017), 19; Juanita De Barros, *Reproducing the British Caribbean: Sex, Gender, and Population after Slavery* (North Carolina, 2014), 55.

[46] Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 1, tr. p. 1, BBOHP PT20, CRL. Callum Brown discusses Haaruun's life and conversion to Islam in Brown, *Religion and Society*, 296.

[47] Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 2, tr. pp. 13–14, BBOHP PT21, CRL. It is true that notions of witchcraft have been historically entangled with discussions of (and access to) various forms of reproductive healthcare, especially abortion, in Jamaica, which were often accessed via "experts in the field of folk or 'bush' medicine." Caribbean scholars have critiqued studies focusing on this association descending into "a compendium of what foreigners find exotic/erotic about Jamaica." See E.J. Sobo, "Abortion Traditions in Rural Jamaica," *Social Science and Medicine* 42, no. 4 (1996): 495–508, esp. 505–06, at 505; and Erna Brodber, "Review: One Blood by Elisa Janine Sobo," *Social and Economic Studies* 42, no. 4 (1993): 278–82, at 279.

[48] Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 2, tr. p. 14, BBOHP PT21, CRL.

[49] Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 2, tr. p. 14, BBOHP PT21, CRL.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

**Figure 3.** Sakiina Haaruun. Photograph taken by Kate Green. Publicity information and photographs, DA6/3/2, CRL.

meant as further evidence of a lack of sexual education in her memories of Jamaica, offered as evidence that perhaps there was no need for any. Price interjected to say that "there was a lot of illegitimacy." In several of the BBOHP interviews, Price intervened to state her own understanding or opinions about what the interviewee was saying.[50] In this case, it seems likely the intervention was designed to elicit memories of illegitimacy in Jamaica. Haaruun rejected the notion that illegitimacy was a particularly Jamaican phenomenon, pointing instead to its colonial roots. "It's not because they actually started doing anything at a young age," she argued, "there's a history behind behaviors which was actually inherited, it's a legacy inherited from colonialism which is going back to [slavery]."[51] Both Campbell and Haaruun thus reminded Price, a white woman, that it was colonialism and slavery that had undermined Black women's bodily autonomy and significantly impacted Jamaican family structures, suggesting her own historical complicity in the stereotypical narratives she was eliciting.

Other late twentieth-century oral history interviews with people who migrated from Jamaica to the UK (such as those conducted by the Southampton Oral History Unit in the mid-1980s) captured very few memories of SRH and did not display the same interest in questions of legitimacy or "family life." When "Mrs. Powell," who migrated from Jamaica to Southampton in 1954, offered to tell the oral historian Dawn McCollin "about my marriage life, if you want to know about that," McCollin replied "No. I would like to know about when you first came to England."[52] Black-led oral history projects, contemporary with the BBOHP

[50] See, for example, Ranjit Sondhi interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 1, tr. pp. 4–6, BBOHP PT16, CRL.
[51] Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 2, tr. p. 15, BBOHP PT21, CRL.
[52] Mrs. Powell interviewed by Dawn McCollin, 2 October 1987, UTK010/33, Southampton City Archives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and those conducted decades later, also did not pursue questions about legitimacy.[53] This suggests that these questions were driven by Price and that, rather than emerging from a broader intellectual agenda, they formed part of "common-sense racialised assumptions" being made by "white sociologists" at the time.[54]

Researchers writing throughout the 1960s, a formative period in Price's life and a decade of significant discussion of Commonwealth migration, debated whether Britain was "the site of collapse or redemption for the West Indian family."[55] Questions of illegitimacy were central to these debates and, as Jordanna Bailkin has noted, "West Indians in Britain were continually stigmatized for their 'habitual' acceptance of illegitimacy."[56]A review of ten studies of Jamaican family patterns by Benjamin Schlesinger in the late 1960s argued that "Most authors dealing with the Jamaican and other West Indian families spend quite a bit of effort in analyzing the reasons for promiscuity and, in turn, the reasons for the large illegitimacy rate."[57] In part, this was because the rate of illegitimacy in Jamaica in 1961 was just under 73 percent.[58] In studies of "lower-class family patterns ... [t]he fact of illegitimate births is one completely taken for granted."[59] These researchers did, however, caution against drawing on these family patterns to reach moral conclusions anchored in Anglo-American normative value judgments about formal marriage, emphasizing that "illegitimacy" did not automatically equate to "fatherless" families.[60] In other words, an illegitimacy rate of nearly three-quarters of the population should not indicate a lack of sexual morality, but instead the lack of salience that ideas about "legitimacy" held. As the American anthropologist Carol Stack argued in the 1970s, concerns that coded "female-headed households and illegitimacy" as dysfunctional or amoral overlooked "the great variety of domestic strategies in urban black communities."[61] Indeed, as Mary Chamberlain has shown, "high illegitimacy rates" could also be attributed to the colonial state's inflexible inability to capture forms of marriage beyond those they sought to establish as the norm. In 1921, for example, the rate of illegitimacy among East Indians in Trinidad was 89.9 percent, "largely because neither Hindu nor Muslim marriages were legally recognized."[62] The British state remained inflexible on questions of legitimacy in its imperial "afterlife." Fathers who migrated to the UK were unable to avail themselves of the right to apply for custody of their children born outside of marriage as the Legitimacy Act 1959 restricted this right to fathers "domiciled in England at the time of the child's birth."[63] Legal restrictions such as this, coupled with ongoing interest in alternative family patterns from social scientists, psychologists, and the press, led to what Bailkin describes as the "recent metropolitan

[53] See, for example, Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race, 2009–2010, Black Cultural Archives: Oral/1; Roots Oral History Collection, GB/32287, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for making this point in their review.

[54] Palmer, "'Each One Teach One'," 94.

[55] Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 190.

[56] Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 193.

[57] Benjamin Schlesinger, "Family Patterns in Jamaica: Review and Commentary," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 30, no. 1 (1968): 136–48, at 140.

[58] Schlesinger, "Family Patterns in Jamaica," 138.

[59] Schlesinger, "Family Patterns in Jamaica," 142.

[60] Schlesinger, "Family Patterns in Jamaica," 145.

[61] Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (Harper & Row, 1975), 44. I am grateful to Sameena Mulla for her thoughtful discussion of Stack's work in relation to white authorities overlooking forms of Black kinship at Birkbeck, University of London in April 2025, which she discusses at the end of Sameena Mulla, "Evaluating Care: Anti-Blackness and Sexual Assault Sentencing in Milwaukee, WI," *Feminist Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (2024): 343–57.

[62] Chamberlain, *Family Love in the Diaspora*, 33.

[63] Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 194.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creation" of "the illegitimate West Indian family," a claim that echoes the counterarguments of several of Price's interviewees.[64]

Price's interest in illegitimacy was likely marked also by the domestic context in which she was working. As Pat Thane and Tanya Evans have argued, "the most outspoken and persistent attack on lone mothers" occurred in Britain during the 1990s, when rates of "divorce, cohabitation, and births out of wedlock reached unprecedented levels."[65] Black single mothers were a totemic symbol of the racialized and misogynistic "vilification of inner-city womanhood," which Jessica White has identified in the late twentieth century,[66] despite the fact that they were more likely to be in regular supportive contact with the fathers of their children than white unmarried mothers.[67] Birmingham in particular had been the site of much discussion and research about "unmarried West Indian mothers" during the 1980s, as well as of resistance to uninformed interventions on the subject.[68] As Pauline Davies, a social services community worker and a self-identified "West Indian single mother" put it in the early 1980s, "there needs to be greater understanding of West Indian culture before intervening in problems of West Indians."[69] Questions of illegitimacy were also closely tied to a decades-long moral panic over the supposedly excessive sexuality of Caribbean men in Britain.[70] It is likely that a combination of the enduring colonial interest in "West Indian illegitimacy," alongside growing cultural and racialized anxieties around unmarried mothers and licentious West Indian fathers, forged Price's particular interest in this subject and gave her license to broach the issue with her Jamaican interviewees.

Yet some of the Jamaican-born interviewees in Birmingham offered narratives of illegitimacy without an initial prompt from Price. Carlton Duncan, pictured in Figure 4, was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1941. As he explained to Price, "I remember a great deal about my mother but not one thing about my father since I was a posthumous child."[71] Duncan spent the first twenty years of his life in Jamaica before moving to the UK in 1961, a move which we will return to shortly.

As with many interviews in the collection, Duncan narrated his memories of early life and education, which included normative thinking on courtship and gender roles.[72] In his

[64] Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 194.

[65] Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford, 2012), 169 and 3 respectively.

[66] Jessica White, "Race, Motherhood, and Multiculturalism: The Making of Female Identities in the British Inner City, c. 1970–1990," (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2021), 220–23.

[67] Thane and Evans, *Sinners?*, 112 and 127. See also Jessica White, "Child-centred Matriarch or Mother Among Other Things? Race and the Construction of Working-class Motherhood in Late Twentieth-century Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 33, no. 4 (2022): 498–521.

[68] Kathleen Griffiths, "Child-rearing Practices in West Indian, Indian and Pakistani Communities," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (1983): 393–409; Mary Venner, "West Indian Families in Britain: A Research Note," *New Community* 12, no. 3 (1985): 504–14; Sarah Bundey et al., "Race, Consanguinity and Social Features in Birmingham Babies: A Basis for Prospective Study," *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 44 (1990): 130–35; White, "Child-centred Matriarch or Mother Among Other Things?," 515, n. 70; Davies, "Trapped." This research was part of a larger concentration of social scientific interest in race in Birmingham, see Palmer, "'Each One Teach One'." For a discussion beyond Birmingham, see Errol Lawrence, "Just Plain Common Sense: The 'Roots' of Racism," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, ed. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Routledge, 2005 [1982]), 74–75.

[69] Davies, "Trapped," 4.

[70] Marcus Collins, ""Pride and Prejudice": West Indian Men in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 391–418.

[71] Carlton Duncan, "Cassette 1 Side A," Carlton Duncan Missing Sections of Transcript, DA6/2/2, CRL. Duncan's parents were not married.

[72] See, for example, Sakiina Haaruun interviewed by Doreen Price, cassette 2 side B, tr. p. 14, BBOHP PT21, CRL, but themes of sex, illegitimacy, and gender relations permeate the early sections of most of the project's interviews.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

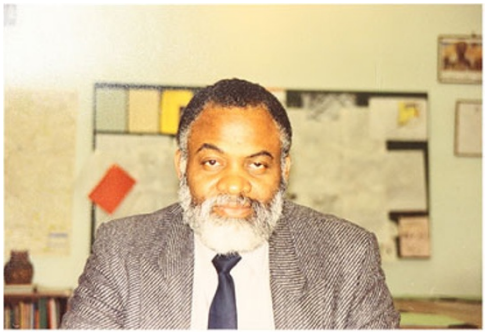

**Figure 4.** Carlton Duncan. Photograph taken by Kate Green. Miscellaneous photographs, DA6/3/8, CRL.

interview, Duncan is explicit about his memories of sex education. "It wasn't allowed. At age nineteen, I couldn't talk about having a girlfriend; I'd be crucified." Duncan explained that "We learnt all [of] it in our own way, nobody, erm, bothered to teach us anything, but there you are."[73]

> That information about sex was absent from Duncan's and Haaruun's education was not unusual or particular to mid-century Jamaica; rather, it was an absence they had in common with pupils in many British, European, and North American schools.[74]

For Duncan, the "strict regime" he experienced was "a pity" because it resulted in "so many illegitimate children."[75] That Duncan himself raised the issue of illegitimacy allowed Price to question him further about attitudes towards reproductive rights in mid-twentieth-century Jamaica. Speaking of a figurative woman who found herself pregnant outside of marriage, Price asked:

> DP: And she'd have the child?... She wouldn't have an abortion?
> CD: Well, it's only relatively recently abortion in this country is legal
> DP: Well, I wondered if there were folk remedies for that kind of ...

[73] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 2, tr. pp. 29–30, BBOHP PT9, CRL.

[74] Angela Davis, "'Oh No, Nothing, We Didn't Learn Anything': Sex Education and the Preparation of Girls for Motherhood, c.1930–1970," *History of Education* 37, no. 5 (2008): 661–77; Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (Oxford, 2019), 67–69; Lucinda McCray Beier, *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880–1970* (Ohio State, 2008), esp. ch. 5 "'They Never Told Us Anything': Sex and Family Limitation." See also Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010), 55, 63–112; Hannah Charnock, "Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950–1980," *Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 1049–51; Sarah Kenny, "'We Are No Longer Certain, Any of Us, What Is "Right" and What Is "Wrong"': Honey, Petticoat, and the Construction of Young Women's Sexuality in 1960s Britain," in *Let's Spend the Night Together: Sex, Pop and British Youth Culture, 1950s–80s*, ed. The Subcultures Network (Manchester, 2023); Caroline Rusterholz, "Reproductive Behavior and Contraceptive Practices in Comparative Perspective, Switzerland (1955–1970)," *The History of the Family* 20, no. 1 (2015): 41–68, esp. 42–43; Bibia Pavard, "The Right to Know? The Politics of Information about Contraception in France (1950s–80s)," *Medical History* 63, no. 2 (2019): 173–88; Etienne van de Walle and Virginie De Luca, "Birth Prevention in the American and French Fertility Transitions: Contrasts in Knowledge and Practice," *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 3 (2006): 529–55; Virginie de Luca Barrusse and Ann-Françoise Praz, "The Emergence of Sex Education: A Franco-Swiss Comparison, 1900–1930," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 1 (2015): 46–74; Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, "Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2004): 71–99.

[75] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 2, tr. p. 30, BBOHP PT9, CRL.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CD: Well, yes, they had that kind of thing, but they were so primitive that so many people lost their lives and so forth, so a very risky business that was.

This short exchange is revealing on two fronts. First, it established a national hierarchy that reinforced colonial power structures, one in which the United Kingdom was positioned as modern and progressive, in comparison, at least, with Jamaica that was coded as reactionary and backward. When Duncan said that "it's only relatively recently abortion in this country is legal," the country he was referring to was the UK where abortion was decriminalized in 1967.[76] At the time of writing, abortion remains illegal in Jamaica. Mention of the "relatively" recent decriminalization of abortion in the UK through deployment of the word "only" invites comparison between the UK and Jamaica, one that rested on the colonial assumption of the UK's medico-moral enlightenment. That it was Jamaican-born Duncan who advanced this suggestion is not a surprise. Writing about the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Rose reminds us that, for Hall's mother, his move from Jamaica to England represented "a major social and racial ascent."[77] Hall's mother was part of a Black middle-class generation in Kingston who bemoaned with "bewildered horror" the decline of deference towards the "mother country" (the UK) that accompanied "the growth of a black consciousness" in Jamaica.[78] It is not surprising, therefore that Duncan (born just nine years after Hall but into a family with less social and financial capital) positioned his narrative about abortion access within this colonially rooted national hierarchy.

Second, the exchange reveals that Duncan was reasonably well informed about access to abortion, despite the moratorium on talking about SRH he described, suggesting that thinking and discussions about terminating potential pregnancies were aspects of adolescent relationships in mid-twentieth-century Jamaica. This stands in marked contrast to Haaruun's answer to Price, which suggested a discursive vacuum around sex. This difference may speak to the extent to which access to SRH information was gendered in Jamaica in the mid-twentieth century. More likely it was age difference that shaped their experience: Haaruun left the island at the age of thirteen, while Duncan left just before turning twenty; he thus had a man's knowledge of sexuality rather than a child's. As Nicole Bourbonnais has shown, "various mechanical and herbal methods to induce abortion had been in use on the island since the days of plantation slavery," with evidence of women actively seeking abortion care in the years leading up to Duncan's birth.[79] Duncan characterized the lack of access to safe and legal abortion as "a very difficult scene" given that he had "girlfriends, and we did, we experimented and so on."[80]

SRH may not have been the central subject of Price's interview with Duncan but, as this section reveals, her life history approach, as well as her problematic interest in questions of illegitimacy, provided the space for SRH memories to surface.[81] These memories, which recollect the culturally enforced silences around sex within families and schools, suggest experiences that were similar across different national and imperial contexts, but that were also firmly rooted in their local contexts. Such particularities are vital. By homing in on one

[76] See Sally Sheldon, Gayle Davis, Jane O'Neill and Clare Parker, *The Abortion Act 1967: A Biography of a UK Law* (Cambridge, 2022).

[77] Jacqueline Rose, "The Analyst," *New York Review of Books*, 21 September 2023.

[78] Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Allen Lane, 2017), 54.

[79] Nicole Bourbonnais, "Class, Colour and Contraception: The Politics of Birth Control in Jamaica, 1938–1967," *Social and Economic Studies* 61, no. 3 (2012): 7–37, at 9 and 26 respectively.

[80] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 2, tr. p. 30, BBOHP PT9, CRL.

[81] On a life story approach providing the space for more multifaceted memory work to take place, see Alistair Thomson, "Using Life Story Interviews: The Researcher Experience," *Oral History* 52, no. 3 (2024): 38–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular interview, not only is this more firmly established, but it is possible to examine the ways in which SRH memories are narratively composed and culturally situated. Such memories were intimately enmeshed in racialized experiences. Duncan's lived experience as a Black man in predominantly white environments, and the racism he encountered throughout his life, provided the framework through which he experienced, understood, and narrated his life history, and through which he made sense of his own reproductive health.

## Professional, political, and personal memories: establishing a narrative framework

It was not his memories of courtship and abortion that attracted the BBOHP to Duncan, but rather his status as a prominent Black leader. At the time of his interview, Duncan was serving as headteacher of the George Dixon Comprehensive School in Birmingham.[82] Duncan thus folded a major reproductive health experience into a gendered metanarrative of his professional life. Alistair Thomson has recently argued that life story interviews have the valuable potential to show "how events from across the life course may have influenced an interviewee's experience of a particular topic or incident."[83] This was certainly true for Duncan, whose professional and public life shaped how he recalled reproductive health experiences. In the early 1990s, the lack of affirming, non-demonizing cultural discourses about race, Black male sexuality, and SRH prevented Duncan from gaining more purchase on these aspects of his history, and he embedded them instead within a professional metanarrative that was more available to him. Duncan was perhaps unsurprisingly more comfortable discussing his work than his reproductive body. Yet exploring the tensions between the personal and the professional allow us to see how SRH memories were threaded throughout his broader life narrative.

Before coming to England in 1961, Duncan had obtained "two of what was then the leading certificates—at secondary level in Jamaica." These allowed him a period of probationary teaching, after which Duncan prepared to enter "the most famous teacher training college" in Jamaica.[84] This was the Mico College, Jamaica's first teacher training college, founded in 1836.[85] Just before entering Mico, however, Duncan received a letter from his mother and stepfather, who were living in the UK, suggesting he pursue the remainder of his studies there. Duncan explained that the letter said:

> 'look, you come to England. The place is *riddled* with teacher training colleges, *riddled* with universities! You gunna have it so much easier getting in to one of these places.' And of course the lure, the attraction of a foreign land, of travel and um the fact that my ambition would be enhanced and more easily obtained and so forth, a young person just nineteen plus at the time, I—I jumped at it. But what a disappointment.[86]

Duncan was disappointed because the British state did not recognize his Jamaican qualifications, despite having been earned from a colonial institution, an experience common

[82] Carlton Duncan, "The Barriers Must Fall," *The Guardian*, 30 January 1990, 21.

[83] Thomson, "Using Life Story Interviews," 38.

[84] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, R1159, Birmingham Museum Online (hereafter BMO).

[85] Thelma B. Thompson, "The Jamaican Teachers' Colleges: Resources From and For a Country," *The Journal of Negro Education* 56, no. 3 (1987): 368–80, at 369.

[86] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, R1159, BMO.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

among many postwar migrants.[87] Having sent off applications to many teacher training colleges after arriving in the UK in 1961, Duncan recalled that letters "came back saying 'we don't recognize your qualifications, we don't know what they *mean*! [...] If you want to teach then you must have five O-Levels and, preferably, one or two A-levels' and so forth." This was a dispiriting and disorienting experience for Duncan as "it meant starting all over again!"[88] As Paul Miller has argued, this rejection was strategic, part of a "hierarchy of knowledge" rooted in Britain's colonial past, designed to entrench the power of white overseas-trained teachers (OTTs) and to put "non-white OTTs at the 'bottom of the heap'."[89]

When Duncan started his studies again, it was in an environment that he experienced as overtly racist. Duncan recalled that: "on my journeys to and from college I'd see these shop windows: 'Rooms to rent. Sorry, no coloureds, no Irish, no dogs'. This kind of thing. And [laughs] I couldn't *understand* that! We were in the *mother country*!" This fusion of public racism and an unexpected interruption in his career trajectory was a process that Duncan recalled "finding very difficult."[90] They also echo the findings of historians such as Juanita Cox that the racism that "Windrush generation" migrants encountered in England challenged the "sense of belonging" many had felt before arriving, resulting in uneven and fraught understandings of their own Britishness.[91]

Despite these setbacks, Duncan went on to have a successful career in teaching. In 1982, he made history as the first Black headteacher of a British secondary school, where students from age eleven studied for certificates of secondary education (which were standardized in 1988).[92] It is important to note that he was not the first Black headteacher in Britain, a title that seems to have eluded outright claim.[93] Certainly several Black women had led schools for decades before Duncan's appointment. Yvonne Conolly became headteacher of Ring Cross Infant School in Islington, North London, in 1969, a few years before Betty Campbell became the first Black headteacher in Wales when she took over Mount Stuart Primary School in the Cardiff suburb of Llanrumney.[94] That Duncan repeatedly emphasized that he had been the "first Black headmaster" acts as a further reminder that his narratives were composed along firmly gendered lines.

Duncan continued to compose a narrative in his interview with Price in which he comprehended his life through the lenses of achievements made in the face of racially aggravated adversity. He explained to Price that, having spent three years as a deputy headteacher in a community college in Coventry, he began "looking for my first Headship," a

[87] Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (Allen Lane, 2017). On the colonial history of education in "the West Indies," see Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford, 2011), esp. ch. 1.

[88] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, R1159, BMO.

[89] Paul Miller, "Race, Origin, Qualifications and the Progression of Overseas Trained Teachers (OTTs) in England," in *Race, Education and Educational Leadership in England: An Integrated Analysis*, ed. Paul Miller and Christine Callender (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 112–13.

[90] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, R1159, BMO.

[91] Juanita Cox, "When Home is a Hostile Environment: Voices of the Windrush Generation and Their Descendants," *Black Histories* 1, nos. 1–2 (2023): 28–43, at 41.

[92] "New Head in Black," *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 6 February 1982; Alison Gordon, "Head in Opt-Out Row Sues Schools Boss," *Mail on Sunday*, 31 January 1993. Both clippings from Carlton Duncan's personal archive. Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020), 69, 143.

[93] This is, perhaps, because of (or in testament to) the communitarian politics of "thinking black" in this period that tended to eschew individualism. See Waters, *Thinking Black*, 92, for an overview of the process of "thinking black" as "a cultural political formation" that we can read as collective.

[94] BBC World Service, Witness History [TV program], "Britain's First Female Black Headteacher," broadcast 28 January 2019, available online: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06zbjfb; BBC, "Hidden Heroines: Betty Campbell," https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/1p7r3fkpsWTbQ9shCFh1QXc/betty-campbell.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

process that involved applying for vacancies and requesting supporting references from senior members of the Local Education Authority (LEA).[95] Despite an impressive career to that point, which had seen him serve as a committee member of the Rampton Inquiry (a national government-appointed inquiry into the subject of "West Indian Children in Our Schools"), his applications were unsuccessful.[96] Duncan understood that his applications were being sabotaged by Mike Feeley, Coventry LEA's Adviser on Multicultural Education. Despite their obvious and mutual animosity, Duncan and Feeley worked closely for much of the late 1970s, including on the Rampton Inquiry until Feeley's resignation in November 1980.[97] Duncan told Price:

> I recall looking for my first headship after about three years of the job [as a deputy head] and Mike Feeley, the adviser attached to the school came along and took me along to a room and says, 'look Carlton, you are causing the Authority a great deal of embarrassment'. I said 'What do you mean?' He says, 'You're trying for a Headship, you've only done three years as a deputy, *I couldn't do it*', he says. Just the inference that he, being Mike Feeley, a white guy, could not after three years apply for a headship, *you* are not supposed to be able to do it, that annoyed me really.[98]

After this exchange, Duncan requested that Feeley no longer be used as a reference and recalled immediately being invited for three interviews, revealing the process of racist gatekeeping that stymied many Black and minority ethnic people from advancing in their careers.[99] With Feeley no longer hampering his attempts at promotion, and having attained "white sanction" to progress, Duncan successfully interviewed for the headship of Wyke Mannor, a small, majority white school on the outskirts of the ethnically diverse city of Bradford in 1982.

These sections of Duncan's interview are rich and reveal much about the history of migration, racism, and education in postwar Britain. This is not surprising: they were, after all, the guiding themes of the BBOHP, the most publicly celebrated aspects of Duncan's working life, and likely the material Duncan assumed he had been invited to discuss. Yet, exploring them in detail reveals the dividends paid to oral historians who reuse extant life history interviews,[100] as they also have much to say about racialized experiences of SRH. Duncan's narratives of his working life not only speak to broader histories of migration, labor, and racism in postcolonial Britain; in recounting these experiences to Price, Duncan was also constructing the gendered and racialized scaffolding through which he would compose a narrative about infertility treatment.

## (Dis)Composing narratives of SRH

The year 1982 was significant for Duncan for several reasons. As he explained to Price: "That's the year, you see, not only had I made the headlines of 'first Black Head Teacher'

[95] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1992, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 1, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[96] Scholarship on race and education in late twentieth-century Britain has attended to the Rampton Committee, but Duncan's role within this history (and the Committee's interest in matters of health) require further analysis. See Waters, *Thinking Black*, 160; and Sally Tomlinson, *Race and Education: Policy and Politics in Britain* (Open University, 2008), 55–98. I am grateful to Chris Jeppesen for discussing the Rampton Committee with me.

[97] Anthony Rampton, *Interim Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups: West Indian Children in Our Schools* (Cmnd. 8273, 1981), iii.

[98] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. pp. 1–2, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[99] This process is identified and analyzed further in Paul Miller, "'White Sanction', Institutional, Group and Individual Interaction in the Promotion and Progression of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics and Teachers in England," *Power and Education* 8, no. 3 (2016): 205–72.

[100] Thomson, "Using Life Story Interviews."

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

... but I was hitting the headlines almost simultaneously, 'World's first Black test tube twins'."[101] Duncan and his second wife Satwinder were both "keen on having children" but discovered issues with their reproductive health after trying to start a family. Duncan explained that Satwinder's

> fallopian tubes were blocked and so only on some private medicine revealed this and they cleaned up her fallopian tubes but one was so bad that they had to take it away and then she had an ectopic pregnancy and that nearly killed her, rushed her into hospital and it was so bad they had that fallopian tube away too.[102]

In relaying Satwinder's experience of discovering issues with her reproductive health, Duncan emphasized the role of private medicine. That he mentioned "some private medicine" discovering Satwinder's blocked fallopian tubes reveals several facets of the SRH landscape in early 1980s Britain and helps us to situate the Duncans within it. Most people's experiences of healthcare in Britain are dominated by the National Health Service (NHS), which provides British citizens with healthcare free at the point of use.[103] However, many "endowed hospitals" continued to operate outside of the NHS's purview, as did many with charitable status or religious affiliation.[104] SRH experiences highlight the porousness of the NHS's operation and its overlaps with charitable and private health providers. As Caroline Rusterholz has shown, charities such as the Brook Advisory Centre, which operated outside of the NHS, were integral mediators of young Britons' interaction with SRH care and advice.[105] It was not a common experience for people in the UK to pay for their healthcare, and the Duncans were among the first in what has been an enduring history of commercialized in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment.[106] Duncan recounted the cost of the treatment (£2,000 per treatment cycle) several times during his oral history interview, underlining the prohibitive cost for most people and the compounded financial, medical, and emotional stress of this time: "A further attempt, four thousand pounds now and again it didn't work and we thought it's not going to work for us 'cause we were running low on monies now anyway so we thought perhaps the best thing to do is adopt."[107]

The Duncans were also significant as parents of color utilizing reproductive technologies, which have been critiqued for relying on and sustaining racialized inequalities.[108] As the feminist legal scholar Dorothy Roberts observed in 1997, middle-class Black recipients of IVF "[stood] out as rare exceptions" within an emerging reproductive healthcare market inhabited "almost exclusively by white people."[109] This was despite the fact that in America, the subject of Roberts's study, those "most likely to be infertile are poor, Black, and poorly

[101] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 4, BBOHP PT10, CRL. For the use of this term in the press, see "Famous Family Cradle Ambition," *Telegraph and Argus*, 18 August 1982, 1.

[102] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 4, BBOHP PT10, CRL. In the transcript of this section of Duncan's interview, ectopic pregnancy is misspelled as "egtopic," perhaps further underlining the fact that reproductive health was not a familiar topic to the BBOHP team.

[103] See Andrew Seaton, *Our NHS: A History of Britain's Best Loved Institution* (Yale, 2023).

[104] Martin Gorsky, "Public, Private and Voluntary Hospitals: Economic Theory and Historical Experience in Britain, c.1800–2010," in *The Political Economy of the Hospital in History*, ed. Martin Gorsky, Margarita Vilar-Rodríguez and Jerònia Pons-Pons (Huddersfield, 2020), 181–220.

[105] Rusterholz, *Responsible Pleasure*.

[106] Lucy van de Wiel, "The Datafication of Reproduction: Time-Lapse Embryoimaging and the Commercialisation of IVF," Sociology of Health & Illness 41, no. S1 (2019): 193–209.

[107] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 5, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[108] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon Books, 1997), ch. 6 "Race and the New Reproduction."

[109] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 251.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

educated."[110] New reproductive technologies were not targeted at those most in need of them; rather, they perpetuated a racialized image of a nuclear, white family. While the healthcare landscape differed in Britain, press images of "test tube babies" were also dominated by white infants, serving to mark out couples like the Duncans as deviating from a racialized norm.[111]

The discovery that Satwinder had a blocked fallopian tube was not the only interaction the Duncans had with private medical providers. Following Satwinder's ectopic pregnancy, the Duncans decided to seek the advice of Patrick Steptoe, the obstetrician and gynecologist who shot to prominence alongside Robert Edwards in 1978 following the birth of Louise Brown, the first baby born as a result of IVF.[112] Unlike the medical practitioners who treated Satwinder's fallopian tubes, Duncan did not negate them in his narrative as simply "some private medicine." Instead, he referred to Steptoe twice as "the great gynaecologist." This was likely due to both the prominence of Steptoe in the media in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the fact that, unlike the private doctor who had discovered Satwinder's blocked fallopian tubes, Steptoe presented a solution rather than a problem.[113] As Duncan put it, "we went along and see the great gynaecologist and he gave us a lot of hope."[114]

On their third attempt at IVF, having already adopted their son James, Satwinder became pregnant with twins who were delivered in August 1982.[115] As the first "Black test tube twins," Natasha and Nathan Duncan's birth was reported by local, national, and international newspapers and broadcast media.[116]

In chronicling this personal history to Price, Duncan, however, placed this narrative of fertility treatment and the birth of his twins within a broader story of racial prejudice that was in fact focused around his working life. Having recounted his memories of the birth of his twins, Duncan was asked more about them.

DP: What were the twins, two girls?

[110] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 253.

[111] Katherine Dow, "'Now She's Just an Ordinary Baby': The Birth of IVF in the British Press," *Sociology* 53, no. 2 (2019): 314–29; Laura Harrison, *Brown Bodies, White Babies: The Politics of Cross-Racial Surrogacy* (New York, 2016), 18–19.

[112] Fiona Kisby Littleton, Susan Bewley and James Owen Drife, eds., *Presenting the First Test-Tube Baby: The Edwards and Steptoe Lecture of 1979* (Cambridge, 2023); R.G. Edwards, P.C. Steptoe and J.M. Purdy, "Establishing Full-Term Human Pregnancies Using Cleaving Embryos Grown *In Vitro*," *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 87, no. 9 (1980): 737–56.

[113] On the prominence of Steptoe through the Brown case, see Kisby Littleton, Bewley and Drife, eds., *Presenting the First Test-Tube Baby*; and Katharine Dow, "Looking into the Test Tube: The Birth of IVF on British Television," *Medical History* 63, no. 2 (2019): 189–208.

[114] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 5, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[115] LBC radio report, "Test Tube Twins Birth," British Universities Film and Video Council, http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0018700132018.

[116] "Britain's First Test-Tube Twins," *Liverpool Echo*, 26 March 1982, 1; "Tube Twins," *Liverpool Echo*, 17 August 1982, 5; "Test Tube Twins," *Lincolnshire Echo*, 17 August 1982, 5; "Test Tube Twins Will Be A First," *Birmingham Post*, 5 April 1982, 5; Charisse Ede, "We Must Learn from Lawrence: Pioneering Head's Plea over Racism in Schools," *Birmingham Post*, 20 March 1999, 5; "Test Tube Twins Born," *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 August 1982, 4; "Test Tube Twins," *Reading Evening Post*, 17 August 1982, 4; "Test Tube Twins," *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 17 August 1982, 28; "Test-Tube Twins Born," *Cambridge Evening News*, 17 August 1982, 7; LBC radio report, "Test Tube Twins Birth." Most articles were agreed that the Duncan twins were Britain's "first test tube twins," but at least one suggested that they were the second. See "Twins Again," *Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 August 1982, 9. Interestingly, this report did not mention the fact that these may have been the first *Black* test tube twins. Coverage also appeared in the Jamaican newspaper *The Daily Gleaner*, 25 August 1982, 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> CD: A boy and a girl. Nathan and Natasha. They are now eight, they are going to be nine soon. James is going to be thirteen soon, that's right. The experiences, a Black Head teacher in an all white school, is a fascinating one.

At first, the narrative direction Duncan takes appears unexpected. Having just shared his experience of making history as the parent of Britain's first Black test tube twins, one might expect him to dwell on this further. This was likely Price's hope, given her question about the twins. Duncan, however, steered the conversation away from his experiences of fertility treatment and back towards his working life. Several oral history studies have alluded to male discomfort with emotional discussions around family, and how men prefer to anchor their interviews in narratives of labor or the material world.[117] Indeed, Duncan likely thought that his experiences as a pioneering Black educator were what the BBOHP was most interested in hearing, given the prominence of this aspect of his public image and the Project's explicit interest in success stories. However, when taken alongside the subsequent section of the interview, the purpose of this narrative move becomes more apparent. Duncan moved on to furnish Price with a story about a substitute teacher who was able to gain the trust of the teachers at Wyke Manor due, in part, to their shared whiteness and the substitute teacher's class privilege. As Duncan explained, "he's a white guy, dresses conservatively, Oxford accent." His new colleagues assumed that, on the basis of their shared whiteness, the new teacher would also share their racist resentment of Duncan. But not only did he not share these views, he reported them back to Duncan, revealing the ways in which his "test tube twins" were being annexed to pre-existing racist animosities. Duncan explained to Price that:

> CD: He [the substitute teacher] was later to report that a very senior member of the department actually came up to him and say, of the school, actually came up to him and say 'have you got a test tube handy, you want to fill it with spunk and take it to the Head Teacher'. He actually said that to him.
> DP: Why?
> CD: They read about my test tube twins, you see, the connection they were just being nasty.[118]

Duncan's move to discuss life as a Black headteacher was not a point of departure. Instead, his discussion of the birth of his twins was marshalled as a means of discussing the racialized prejudice and aggression he experienced as headteacher of Wyke Manor. This was not an isolated incident. In addition to having bricks and pieces of wood thrown through his office window by the same racist members of staff who had made derogatory comments about his fertility treatment, Duncan's family were more directly targeted. As he explained:

> I'd go home and I would find them [Duncan's family] in tears, worried out of their minds 'cause people used to cut out of the newspaper photographs of the twins, they must have collected a lot because they had hit nearly every newspaper, the nationwide, countrywide, in fact all over the world the story had gone but every so often a picture from the newspaper with my twins would arrive at home, my home address,

[117] See, for example, Richard Hall, "Emotional Histories: Materiality, Temporality and Subjectivity in Oral History Interviews with Fathers and Sons," *Oral History* 47, no. 1 (2019): 61–70; and John Kirk and Christine Wall, *Work and Identity: Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[118] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. pp. 6–7, BBOHP PT10, CRL. "Spunk" is a slang word for semen.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> 'death' written across their faces and threatening words, similar words, and my wife would pick them up and they were distressed and so forth. I was really very worried and all the time this was happening …[119]

Scholars, including Seán McLoughlin and Kieran Connell, have argued that the 1980s were a turning point in Bradford's history of race relations, one that saw the entrenchment of quotidian forms of racism. Much of that racism was targeted at South Asians and, McLoughlin argues, "schools were undoubtedly the key social setting" for racist antagonism.[120] This was due in large part to the "Honeyford Affair," a moment of significant division within Bradford following headteacher Ray Honeyford's opposition to a series of initiatives designed "to address the problem of racism in schooling."[121] South Asians in Bradford (who made up 75 percent of Honeyford's school) organized concerted opposition to Honeyford. Connell has argued that Honeyford "formalised many of the racialized anxieties" of white Bradfordians, uncomfortable with the increasingly multicultural and ethnic makeup of the city, in addition to attracting the support of far-right racists.[122] In this heated context, it is significant that Duncan's memories of his first headship are indelibly linked with his experiences of fertility treatment. These experiences were enmeshed because racist actors in 1980s Bradford used the birth of his "test tube twins" as a tool in their violently reactionary arsenal. Narratives of SRH are, as Caroline Rusterholz, Laura Kelly, Annabel Sowemimo, and others have shown, so often riddled with exclusionary and harmful forms of racism.[123] Duncan's narrative, however, reveals a historical experience in which Black people's negotiation of SRH was used against them as part of wider racist logics.

That it is oral history interviews that inform us of these experiences is significant. Not only do they speak to the implications of the Duncans' IVF treatment beyond the immediate impressions of the documentary archive, they also help us to understand the dynamic social worlds in which Carlton Duncan narrated them. "Oral testimonies," Hilary Young has argued, "represent a narrator's attempt to shape his or her world, to fit a picture he or she wishes to present, within the discourses available," a process oral historians identify as "composure."[124] Thinking of Duncan's narrative composure in this way is vital to understanding the ways in which he situated his own reproductive experiences within both his longer life history and the broader cultural scripts available to him. Applied to Duncan's narrative, it is possible to analyze how SRH narratives feature in his understanding of himself, drawing out wider conclusions about the extent to which SRH has been part of the available cultural scaffolding racialized people use to construct life histories. In telling the story of the birth of his twins via IVF in the way that he did, Duncan positioned them within a narrative of racism that was felt in particular and acute ways across his career. This in itself was part of the broader teleology that Duncan's life story was composed to convey: one of overcoming adversity, especially adversity imposed by racist individuals and structures.[125]

[119] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 8, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[120] Seán McLoughlin, "Writing 'Bradistan' Across the Domains of Social Reality," in *Writing the City*, ed. McLoughlin et al., 29–34, at 33.

[121] Kieran Connell, *Multicultural Britain: A People's History* (Hurst, 2024), 180.

[122] Connell, *Multicultural Britain*, 200–20, at 200.

[123] Rusterholz and Kelly, "Depo-Provera"; Hanley, "Migration, Racism and Sexual Health"; Annabel Sowemimo, *Divided: Racism, Medicine and Why We Need to Decolonise Healthcare* (Profile Books: Wellcome Collection, 2023). For an analysis of the racism that framed discourses around health issues that were neither sexual nor reproductive, see Roberta Bivins, *Contagious Communities: Medicine, Migration, and the NHS in Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 2015).

[124] Hilary Young, "Hard Man, New Man: Re/composing Masculinities in Glasgow, c.1950–2000," *Oral History* 35, no. 1 (2007): 71–81, at 80.

[125] That this narrative of the self can be seen as a teleology is clear when one takes into account the title of Duncan's autobiography. See Carlton Duncan, *True Determination* (BlackGold Publishing, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Duncan's composure reveals more than the fact that he positioned himself within the increasingly available cultural scripts of anti-racist activism, one that the BBOHP was expressly interested in.[126] It also suggests a lack of affirmative, culturally available discourse around race and SRH for Duncan. This is not to say that such a discourse was absent, far from it. As Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe pointed out in the mid-1980s, "Black women have, over the years, played such a vital part in exposing, denouncing, organizing and campaigning around health issues."[127] Black women in particular were subject to racist "abuse" "at the hands of the Family Planning service" and played active roles in resisting unwanted abortions, sterilization, or the disproportionate prescription of Depo-Provera.[128]

However, these were discourses that remained largely unavailable to Duncan. He was likely less aware of Black women's health activism than he was of anti-racist pedagogy.[129] Certainly, Duncan was less radical than women like Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, all of whom had been active in groups such as the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent and the Brixton Black Women's Group.[130] Historian Simon Peplow has highlighted this "division" between Black leaders and activists in 1980s Britain over how to respond to racist policing and judicial indifference to Black issues.[131] On the one hand, "liberal" figures lobbied for high-profile public inquiries. On the other, more "radical" people "believed no advancement would or could be achieved through frameworks deemed inherently discriminatory and racist," frameworks through which public inquiries function.[132] Duncan sat much more comfortably on the liberal side of this divide, serving as a magistrate in Coventry and on the Rampton Committee (and the Swann Committee that succeeded its inquiries into education and multiculturalism), positions that may have obscured or provincialized his view of the Black women's health movement.[133]

Moreover, Duncan inhabited a cultural and social world in which "West Indian" men had been routinely stereotyped as "vicious, indolent, violent, licentious, and antifamilial," part of a process of distinguishing "the Caribbean 'Other,'" which Marcus Collins identifies as hinging on a particular reading of hypersexualized Black masculinity by postwar white Britons.[134] This crude, racist model was widely challenged.[135] Other stereotypes about Caribbean family patterns had clearly permeated Price's consciousness and impacted the questions she asked her interviewees about illegitimacy; perhaps Duncan was reluctant to

[126] Tony Collins, "Teaching Plan to Aid Black Pupils," *Sandwell Evening Mail*, 13 November 1998, 31; "Headship for City School's Deputy," *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 11 February 1982, 9; Ede, "We Must Learn from Lawrence." We can also see Duncan positioning himself in this light across his own life writing, both in memoirs and academic texts. See, for example, Carlton Duncan, "Developing a Multicultural Approach to the Curriculum: The Role of the Headteacher (A Case Study at Wyke Manor)," in *Multicultural Education: Towards Good Practice*, ed. Ranjit Arora and Carlton Duncan (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); and Duncan, *True Determination*.

[127] Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Virago, 2018 [1985]), 107.

[128] Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, *Heart of the Race*, 103. On the campaign against Depo-Provera, see Lambert, "'The Objectionable Injectable'."

[129] Arora and Duncan, eds., *Multicultural Education*.

[130] Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66, 69, 88–98.

[131] Such responses included rioting that occurred in Handsworth (and elsewhere) in 1981. See Simon Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain* (Manchester, 2019), 202; Hall with Schwartz, *Familiar Stranger*, 190; Connell, *Black Handsworth*.

[132] Peplow, *Race and Riots*, 205.

[133] Carlton Duncan interviewed by Doreen Price, 11 June 1991, cassette 3 side 1, tr. p. 1, BBOHP PT10, CRL.

[134] Collins, "Pride and Prejudice," 391.

[135] Collins, "Pride and Prejudice," 407–08.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discuss his own reproductive history in case Price asked questions anchored in the pervasive racist logics about Black male sexuality. Certainly, those logics remained the dominant cultural script concerning Black male sexuality.[136] Duncan's narrative occupied a liminal space between that discourse and an exclusively white image of the "IVF baby," dominated not only by Louise Brown, but also by a pervasive imagery of whiteness. Reproductive technology was spoken about as both a potential miracle for childless white couples, and a "designer baby nightmare" with the potential for "a *black* woman [to choose] to have a white baby."[137] Without a more accessible narrative of Black reproductive healthcare—particularly as a father—and in the face of these oppressive racist discourses, Duncan composed memories of his "test tube twins" within narratives that were more personally and culturally resonant for him: his professional life and overcoming racist adversity, topics that were indelibly linked.

Even with the considerable contributions of Black women's health activism and scholarship, race and racism often remain underexamined in relation to SRH. Annabel Sowemimo has pointed to the "gaping holes in many of our discussions" about race and SRH, both among medical practitioners and the wider public.[138] This is borne out in the SRH activism of people of color in the late twentieth century. At around the time of Duncan's interview, many Black and South Asian people in Britain were founding "by and for" HIV/AIDS organizations, "community-led services" that were "tailored towards the specific needs of Black gay men" who had been neglected by both the state and HIV/AIDS groups until the late 1980s.[139] When Arnold Awoonor-Gordon returned to the UK from Sierra Leone in the mid-1980s, he

> joined the Terrence Higgins Trust as a volunteer to see how I can help. And it was while I was there that I decided that um, there were nothing for the black community. The gay community had sort of grabbed AIDS as their own, as our disease, we don't care about heterosexuals or black people or even white people, or even women. So that's why I decided that you know this is not right, there must be black people out there who are suffering also. That's why I started Blackliners to help the black community.[140]

This example makes clear the lack of widespread public discourse around Black SRH, even in an epidemic context, which manifested in a need to create spaces and discourses in which Black Britons *could* discuss their SRH.[141] These, though, were few, and tended to be heavily concentrated around specific sexual health concerns such as HIV, or other conditions such as sickle cell disease.[142]

[136] Collins describes this as "the mystique of black male sexuality": Collins, "Pride and Prejudice," 406.

[137] These quotes are from "Central Weekend: Designer Babies," EDWS 20/7/16, Churchill Archives Centre, emphasis in the original spoken introduction to this program. For more on the whiteness of new reproductive technologies see Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, ch. 6.

[138] Sowemimo, *Divided*, i.

[139] Jason Okundaye, *Revolutionary Acts: Love and Brotherhood in Black Gay Britain* (Faber and Faber, 2024), 179.

[140] Arnold Awoonor-Gordon interviewed by Paul Coleman, 17 July 2017, 4801/A/03/085, London Metropolitan Archives.

[141] On this, see Lucy Cann, "Race, Homosexuality, and AIDS in London: The Response of British AIDS Voluntary Organizations to Black Gay Men's Sexual Health Needs During the AIDS Crisis (1980s–2000)," *Modern British History* 36, no. 1 (2025): 1–23.

[142] "People with Sickle Cell," *BLGC News*, April 1988, 3; "HIV & Aids Update," *BLGC News*, February/March 1993, 5, both in HCA/EPH/45 (1 of 2), London School of Economics Library. See also Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, *Heart of the Race*, 108–09.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These lacunae may go some way towards explaining why Duncan narrated his experience of fertility treatment through a broader discourse of racism and resistance in education: without a more available cultural script about Black engagement with SRH, particularly for men, Duncan positioned his experiences within narratives that were more culturally and personally familiar. In relaying these experiences to Price, Duncan was actively carving out a space for discussions of SRH in which Black people in Britain were the central actors. New oral histories will continue to reveal these experiences but, as I have shown here, existing interviews should continue to be mined both for what they have to say about racialized experiences of SRH, and about the ways in which interviewees negotiated the composure of such narratives.

## Conclusion

Those interviewed for the BBOHP composed their own life histories in varied and individually resonant ways. Several imparted well-rehearsed personal narratives, and all knew they were creating an archive under the rubric of a community Black history project. The life history approach to these interviews, however, also allowed a diverse range of experiences to be recalled. For the historian of SRH, this is particularly valuable. Few oral history studies capture memories of SRH, save for those explicitly seeking to do so. Fewer still give space to Black memories of SRH, just one aspect of the archival drought of experiential sources in this field. Price's life history approach allowed memories of early access to sex education; attitudes towards birth control, abortion, and family formation; and shifting attitudes to issues around sexuality across time and place to emerge. In particular, her interest in illegitimacy provided a space for interviewees to recall memories of reproductive norms and led to related discussions of sex education and courtship. Such memories were elicited in a context in which racist stereotypes about West Indian sexuality and family structures circulated. Yet interviewees pushed back against the colonial logics that surfaced in these moments, identifying "the colonial footprint" and rejecting narratives about SRH proffered by the white interviewer.[143]

As the father of "the world's first Black test tube twins," Carlton Duncan's BBOHP interview is a particularly important source for the writing of SRH histories. But unpacking his narrative also reminds us that historians need to be attentive not only to what is said in an oral history interview, but also that we need to identify the relationship between memories and the broader cultural scripts that shape how they are expressed and given meaning. If this poses challenges, it also opens up possibilities for a richer understanding. To be sure, a new collection of oral histories that explicitly seeks to illuminate SRH experiences through the analytical lens of race and racialization will serve as a critical source for future research. Yet attentive listening to extant archived interviews to see how and when SRH memories surface and are then placed in a life history can help us to understand and account for the ways in which SRH has contributed to constructions of the Black self in late twentieth-century Britain.

**George J. Severs** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Geneva Graduate Institute where he works on the Race and Ethnicity: Sexual Health and Reproductive Experience (RE:SHaRE) project. He is a historian of sexual health, sexual violence, and HIV/AIDS in modern Britain, and is the Public History Editor of *Oral History*. The author is extremely grateful to Ranjit Sondhi and Ravi Thiara for discussing the Birmingham Black Oral History Project with him. He thanks Keith Bridgewater at the University of Birmingham Library for helping to check some of

[143] Maryam Nabavi, "The Power of Oral Tradition: Critically Resisting the Colonial Footprint," in *Anti-Colonialism and Education*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf (Brill, 2006), 175–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the literature in this article, and to the staff at the Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, for their assistance and for permitting the use of images. For their comments on previous versions of this article the author thanks Nicole Bourbonnais, Sophie Syms, Christine Wall, and especially Caroline Rusterholz. Aspects of this article were aided by audiences at the Geneva Graduate Institute, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, and the Universities of Basel, Birmingham, Leiden, and Strathclyde. Comments from the *Journal of British Studies*' anonymous reviewers and editors helped enormously. The research for this article was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant number 203399). The author is grateful to the library of the Geneva Graduate Institute for making this article open access. Please address any correspondence to george.severs@graduateinstitute.ch

**Cite this article:** George J. Severs, "Composing and Narrating Black Memories of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Jamaica and England in 1990s Birmingham," *Journal of British Studies* 64 (2025): e60. https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10122