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**Defying Racial Prejudice: 2nd World War Relationships between British women and  
black GIs and the raising of their offspring**

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On August 26<sup>th</sup> 1945 the front page of the *Sunday Pictorial*, a popular British paper, carried the following heading 'All This Happened in England Yesterday'. The heading implied a very *un-English* happening. The article opens:

The scene was Bristol, most English of all English cities. The time was 2 a.m. The actors were a mob of screaming girls aged between 17 and 25. Their hysteria was caused by news that four companies of American negro soldiers in the city were leaving for home. The girls besieged the barracks where the soldiers were and began singing 'Don't Fence Me In'. This was too much for the coloured men, who began to break down the barbed wire surrounding their quarters. In a few minutes hundreds of girls and U.S. soldiers were kissing and embracing.<sup>1</sup>

'Don't Fence Me In', written by Cole Porter, had recently been sung by cowboy Roy Rogers in the 1944 Hollywood movie *Hollywood Canteen*; it was a quintessentially American song but was widely known in Britain. The article ends: 'Most of them [the young women] had been waiting since 7 p.m. the night before, and although it was pouring with rain, they decided to wait. "I don't mind getting wet," said one 18-year-old girl. "I intend to give my sweetie a good send-off."' <sup>2</sup> Why were these young women prepared to go to such lengths to say farewell? How had black American soldiers and British women met and with what consequences? Drawing on thirty-four interviews with the offspring of British women and black GIs, this article seeks to present some answers to these questions.

A number of historians have of course already touched on wartime relationships between black GIs, and their British girl-friends, including several who have focused on the women.<sup>3</sup> Sonya Rose's impressive scholarship charts the widespread fear that wartime conditions were eroding young women's self-control: they were 'throwing themselves' at soldiers, leading to the potential of illegitimate babies. She convincingly demonstrates that the anxiety was that much greater where the GIs were black, and that the behaviour of these young women was widely seen as damaging to Britain's national reputation.<sup>4</sup> Wendy Wheeler has importantly 'coined the term "sexual patriotism" to describe what popular opinion demanded of women in their wartime relationships with white and black allies (and enemies).'<sup>5</sup> These historians have contributed greatly to setting the scene for an understanding of relationships between British women and black Americans during the war, but they do not say a great deal about the women's actual experiences. I cannot claim to remedy this absence to any great degree, but listening to the narratives of some of these women's children extends our understanding of what these women went through.

### Black Americans in Britain

Approximately three million American troops passed through Britain in the period 1942 – 1945, many stationed there for the subsequent invasion of France. The exact numbers of black GIs are not known but it could have been as many as 300,000, for the Pentagon had decreed that ten per cent of American troops in every theatre of war should be African-American, reflecting the percentage in the U.S. as a whole.<sup>6</sup> The American troops were based all over Britain, but in greatest concentration in Southern England, South West England, South Wales, East Anglia and Lancashire. From all accounts the British public largely felt positive about the arrival of the black GIs, at least initially. Reports from the Home Intelligence Unit (set up in November 1939 to monitor morale) frequently mentioned people's appreciation of 'the

extremely pleasing manners of the coloured troops.’<sup>7</sup> The June 1943 Home Intelligence Report on *British Public Feeling about America* drew together some of the remarks people had made over the past year and a half, and noted (without comment) ‘a tendency to regard the negroes as “childish, happy and naïve fellows who mean no harm”’. But many people were shocked by the racism of the white GIs; for example, the *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* for 10 September 1942 noted how ‘considerable indignation is reported against any discrimination by white Americans upon their coloured troops.’<sup>8</sup> However, although many stressed British tolerance in contrast to the segregation of the American armed forces, they did not necessarily condone intimacy, indeed were often hostile to interracial sex and marriage. While most were committed to being friendly, polite and welcoming hosts (what Webster usefully refers to as ‘friendly but brief’)<sup>9</sup> many people, particularly the older generation, drew the line at sexual relations. Similarly historian David Reynolds points to the distinction made by the British between civil rights and sexual wrongs.<sup>10</sup>

From the moment black GIs arrived there were various official attempts to prevent inter-racial relationships. The War Office, in August 1942, decreed that the British Army should lecture their troops, including the women of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service), on the need to keep contact with black GIs to a minimum. The ATS had a (probably unfair) reputation for sexual promiscuity, being known as the ‘groundsheet of the army’.<sup>11</sup> Local police were to report women soldiers found with black GIs. There was also discussion in government circles about how to guide the civilian population. Whispering campaigns were promoted by the Women’s Voluntary Services, hinting at the high rate of venereal disease amongst black Americans.<sup>12</sup> And the Defence of the Realm Act was used, prosecuting women for trespass or loitering if found with black GIs on military premises.<sup>13</sup> In August 1942 Major-General Dowler, in charge of the Southern Command (the South of England) where a large proportion of black GIs were to be stationed, sent a paper headed ‘Notes on Relations with Coloured

Troops' to District Commanders in his area; it was subsequently distributed more widely and was given War Office approval. One of Dowler's proposals was that 'white women should not associate with coloured men. It follows then, they should not walk out, dance, or drink with them.'<sup>14</sup> Advice in women's magazines also discouraged white/black contact. A reader enquired of *Women's Own* agony aunt, Leonora Eyles in November 1943:

There are a lot of coloured U.S. soldiers in our town and I feel sorry for them, far from home and very few nice girls being friends with them. Only the cheap sort of girls speak to them and some of them are so polite and friendly. Is it all right to be friends – and I mean friends only – with them, they are fighting for us?

Eyles replied: 'it would not be fair either to them or you to form such a close friendship as may lead to romance. It is not a question of their being "inferior" but *different*, and ... on the very rarest occasions do such marriages succeed.'<sup>15</sup> Claiming the barrier of 'difference' might have avoided overt racism, but it was still a statement against inter-racial relationships.

What knowledge did people have of Americans before their arrival? As the *British Public Feeling about America* report noted, 'by far the most important source of ideas about life in America is the cinema.'<sup>16</sup> Most girls and young women went to the cinema about twice a week and it was very largely Hollywood movies that they saw - hugely popular films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Mrs Miniver* (1942).<sup>17</sup> Here in Britain were billeted men who spoke with 'exotic' Hollywood accents and had money to spend, for American soldiers were paid on average five times as much as British soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Despite rationing, the Americans regularly distributed cigarettes, chocolate, chewing-gum and coca-cola (known as the four Cs) as well as nylons (stockings). 'Got any gum, chum?' children would cheekily demand, while the GIs would insouciantly reply: 'got a sister, mister?' The attraction of the GIs was unsurprising. What did surprise – and worry - the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, however, as he informed the War Cabinet in October 1942, was that 'some

British women appear to find a peculiar fascination in associating with men of colour.’<sup>19</sup> In September 1942 a black GI stationed in Northern Ireland confirmed this when he wrote home: ‘all the girls are going crazy about us.’<sup>20</sup>

### The Appeal of the Black GI

What was this ‘peculiar fascination’ with black Americans? The *British Public Feeling about America* report likewise mentioned that ‘young irresponsible girls from homes where there is little parental control are said to find coloured men tremendously fascinating.’<sup>21</sup> Part of the ‘fascination’ was surely unfamiliarity: many Britons had never seen a black person before other than on cinema screens. There were only a few thousand black people living in Britain before the war and they were largely concentrated in the port areas of Liverpool, Cardiff, North and South Shields and London. There was also the appeal of the black soldiers’ politeness. The ‘extremely pleasing manners of the coloured troops’ has already been mentioned. Indeed the black GIs were found to be better mannered than their white counterparts, as African-American journalist and former GI Ormus Davenport reported after the war: ‘The simple fact is, as most of the British girls in the villages who dated the American Negro can testify, the Negro was on the whole more courteous, more considerate, and more sincere than the white GI, whose attitude was far more frequently superior, condescending and insincere.’<sup>22</sup> Another part of the appeal related to black American culture being so associated with modern music and new forms of dance. For British women, dancing was their main leisure pursuit throughout the 1920s, 30s and into the 40s – along with visits to ‘the pictures’.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the English dance the ‘Lambeth Walk’, there had been no new dance in England since the Charleston of the mid 1920s.<sup>24</sup> The jitterbug and the lindy hop were dances associated with swing, jazz and black American culture; they were novel and daring. The magazine *Picture Post* photographed some of the dance encounters of British women and black GIs in 1943. Known for its relatively

progressive politics, the magazine nevertheless resorted to racial – and racist – determinism: the claim that dancing ability was an *inherent* attribute: ‘Dancing is to the coloured people what spirit is to the British or warfare to the Germans – their truest form of self-expression. It is a racial heritage, tracing back to the dark ritual of the tom-tom [an African drum]’.<sup>25</sup> Thus even the liberal press had a notion of inherited (and hierarchical) racial difference.

White Americans were far from happy that British women were choosing black GIs over them. One wrote home resentfully: ‘It seems that several outfits of colored troops preceded us over here ... the girls really go for them in preference to the white boys, a fact that irks the boys no end.’<sup>26</sup> Another white GI expressed similar sentiments: ‘I have seen nice looking white girls going with a coon. They think they are hot stuff. The girls are so dumb it’s pitiful.’<sup>27</sup> While white Americans resented British women who chose to socialise with black GIs, there were British people who disapproved too. As a *Home Intelligence Report* in August 1942 noted: ‘adverse comment is reported over girls who “walk out” with coloured troops.’<sup>28</sup> The girls and women tended to be seen as the instigators, as another Report made clear:

The women and girls concerned ... in many cases are said to make most of the running. Blame of the girls is more widespread, and sometimes stronger, than of the men. Their predatoriness is particularly censured; some girls are said to be dunning as many as three or four US soldiers to provide for their coming child’<sup>29</sup>

A statement in *British Public Feeling about America* implicitly added to the explanation of why it was the women who were blamed: ‘the coloured men are looked on as “not really responsible persons”,’ a view that went hand in hand of course with the idea that black people were ‘childish, happy and naïve’.<sup>30</sup>

This censuring of young women meant that the ‘over-sexed’ GI caricature was matched by that of the British ‘good-time girl’: an irresponsible, selfish young woman who sought

nothing but pleasure, especially sexual pleasure.<sup>31</sup> These were ‘the cheap sort of girls’ mentioned by the woman who wrote to *Women’s Own* agony aunt in November 1943. War work had taken many young women away from home, and they were generally earning far more money than before.<sup>32</sup> Often for the first time in their lives they were outside the control of family and community and they understandably sought adventure and romance. The epithet ‘good-time girl’ was applied not only to single girls and women, but also to married women who pursued extramarital relationships.<sup>33</sup> The June 1944 *Home Intelligence Report* mentioned concerns about ‘the increase in moral laxity — particularly of married women, whose husbands are abroad, with Dominion and US troops’.<sup>34</sup> The behaviour of the ‘good-time girl’ transgressed the ‘sexual patriotism’ demanded of women; it was widely seen as damaging to Britain’s national reputation and countered the ‘good citizenship’ propagated in the war.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the various attempts to dissuade British women from forming partnerships with black GIs, many such partnerships occurred, as the quote that opens this article demonstrates. There is little information about what the relationships were like, and most of the women, and their black American boy-friends, are unfortunately no longer alive. However it has been estimated that 1,700 to 2,000 mixed-race children were the result.<sup>36</sup> I have conducted oral history interviews with thirty-four of these children, and have accessed a further thirty brief accounts. Clearly what is heard in the narratives of these women’s children, years after the events described, do not give the ‘voice’ of the women as such, but they give memories of what these children experienced at the time, what they believed their mothers had experienced, and what they remember having been told by their mothers. The leading oral historian Alessandro Portelli points out that memory is ‘an active process of creation of meanings.’<sup>37</sup> These children have attempted to make sense of what their mothers went through, and their accounts provide valuable glimpses into the choices and difficulties their mothers faced.<sup>38</sup>

### Black GIs and British Women

Where did young British women and black GIs meet? Pubs and dances were the key social spaces where they were able to socialise, generally on evenings designated 'blacks only'. The US army was segregated and in Britain segregation arrangements were set up across the country involving passes for entry to towns near to U.S. bases, with some days for whites, others for blacks, while some towns were designated as either 'whites only' or 'blacks only' for the war's duration. In many villages, pubs too were segregated along colour lines, and dances were held for black GIs one evening, whites the next. Many of my interviewees mention pubs or dance halls as their parents' first meeting place. Sandra's white mum attended a Bristol pub called *The Spread Eagle* on a so-called 'black' night, where she met Sandra's dad.<sup>39</sup>

Monica explained how her parents met:

She found out that there was a dance being held in Prescot [near where she lived in Liverpool] for the black GIs. One of her friends invited her out ... Mum said she wasn't allowed in the dancehall this time. Her and her friends went to the local pub that the GIs would go in before and after the dance ... *The Wellington* and ... one night one of the groups came in and my dad was amongst the group.<sup>40</sup>

Carole T's mother also met her father in a pub: 'my mum was an orphan by the time she was fourteen', so she went to live with an older half-brother. 'He took her on and then he was running a pub in Poole called the *Swan*, on the Quay where my dad was stationed ... she also used to help out in a pub called *The Jolly Sailor* and I think that is where they met.'<sup>41</sup> Joyce thinks her parents met either at *Clacton* pub in Cosham, Portsmouth or at a local dance hall. He would then visit her at her home in Portsmouth where she lived with her mother: 'my nan used to play the piano, so the yanks [the black GIs] used to buy crates of beer and they used to come up and have a sing-song with the piano.'<sup>42</sup> James's mother met his father at a dance in Long Eaton, Derbyshire, on a 'black night'. She went to the dance with a friend, despite being

married with four children at the time. As James expresses it: ‘probably she deserved to have a little bit of life for herself, having had four children rather quickly, one after the other.’<sup>43</sup> Trevor’s mother met his father at a dance in Honeybourne, Worcestershire, near where his father was stationed.<sup>44</sup> Pauline’s mother, who was in the Land Army, met her father at a dance in Eastleigh, Hampshire.<sup>45</sup> (Pauline’s father was not in fact a black GI but a Mexican-American, so this was not likely to have been at a ‘black night’ dance).

If a woman was known to have danced with a black GI, she tended to be ostracised by the white Americans. According to a fifteen-year-old factory worker from Pollock, near Glasgow, the girls and women were identifiable because their names were noted down: ‘if you danced with the coloured Americans you were blacklisted by the white ones. They kept a list at the camp of these girls.’<sup>46</sup> Pam, an English woman whose sister married a white American GI, attended a ‘black night’ dance. Her nephew recounts:

A local photographer would apparently go to dances and take pictures of dancing couples. Some of them would be posted in his shop window (presumably with the aim of selling them to the couples involved). Anyway, there was a photo of Pam and a black soldier dancing, which, the story went, she was terrified would get back to her mother.<sup>47</sup>

British women in relationships with black GIs were frequently condemned as sluts and loose women. Monica’s mother ‘often got names called in the street. I remember one time there was a lady from a couple of doors away ... this lady came past and ... hit my mum and she shouted in the street, “you nigger lover”.’<sup>48</sup> Similarly Carole T’s mother was often called ‘a nigger lover.’<sup>49</sup> Dave G recounts how his mother, who worked at Westland Industries making aircraft components:

told me stories of what it was like being out with my father, and the stick they used to get. Particularly from white American soldiers... when my father and her went into a

pub or café or anything like that ... Mum used to say, the white Yanks used to kick off and say: 'yeh nigger lover'.<sup>50</sup>

Some of these inter-racial couples would have liked to have married. All American troops had to receive permission to marry from their commanding officers (who in the UK were all white) but for black GIs permission was invariably refused.<sup>51</sup> As Davenport noted: 'some [women] had acquired parental permission to wed – but could not get the permission of the U.S. Army authorities.' According to Davenport, the U.S. Army 'unofficially had a "gentleman's agreement" which became in practice official policy. The agreement said "No negro soldier or sailor will be given permission to marry any British white girl!" ... Not one GI bride going back to the U.S. under the U.S. government scheme is the wife of a Negro.' Even had it been permitted, upon returning to the U.S. the marriage might well have been deemed illegal, for 30 of the 48 U.S. states had anti-miscegenation laws. Davenport claimed that

scores of young couples to whom these children were born were genuinely and legitimately in love ... There were a few couples who were able to marry secretly, but it was not easy for a coloured man to adopt an assumed name and get a birth certificate in order to marry. In any case, all registrars were aware of the fact that anyone in uniform must be armed with official permission.<sup>52</sup>

The 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Air Force, based in East Anglia, was explicit about banning inter-racial marriages: Commander Gen Hugh Knerr dismissed all requests as 'against public policy', despite being warned that 'this was not strictly in accord with the directives of higher authority'.<sup>53</sup> In 1944 he was challenged on the grounds of civil rights when a divorced black GI from Dallas applied to marry a woman from Sheffield, who was pregnant with his child. When Knerr predictably rejected the application as 'against public policy', the woman and her father took the case to

their local MP who raised it with the Foreign Office. It was decreed however that the Commanding Officer had the final say and the case was dropped.<sup>54</sup>

Davenport suggested that when a black GI mentioned pregnancy, ‘the man was usually transferred to some other county or to a distant part of Britain ... When a girl tried to follow up her claim against the father of her child, the Army would invariably find “no evidence of ever having such a man on the records.”’<sup>55</sup> The fact that black GIs could not marry their white British girl-friends and might be suddenly transferred elsewhere appears to have been known to some women. This knowledge was apparent when Karen, a mixed-race GI baby, asked her mother about her father:

I said, ‘why didn’t you marry him?’ She said, ‘it wasn’t allowed.’ She said, ‘if they’d have found out that he had a child ... he would have gone and I think that’s what happened really’ ... I said ‘did you love him, Mum?’ and she said ‘yes I did ... I really did, he was a gentleman’ and I went ‘he wasn’t that much of a gentleman, mother!’ and she started laughing and she said ‘he was a gentleman’ ... and I said, ‘why didn’t you marry him?’ ‘Well’, she said ... ‘if they found out, they would move him.’<sup>56</sup>

Heather’s mother and black GI father were both twenty-seven when she was born and both single. They had met in or near Ipswich. Heather’s mother worked as a domestic servant; Heather thinks her father was stationed at Martlesham Heath, Suffolk, a U.S. air base. Heather was born on V.E. day (8 May 1945). ‘He [her father] kept in touch. They wanted to be together but they thought there was no way. His mother used to send some money. They were constantly in touch initially, but both married other people and the contact stopped.’<sup>57</sup> Presumably they thought that ‘there was no way’ because of legal and social barriers. There was also the financial barrier. He was from North Carolina and worked on his parents’ cotton and potato fields. As Heather’s husband Tim put it: ‘He was a young black man, just after the war. No

rights, probably no money - or very little money. Dirt farmers, maybe, scratching a living and just making a living - just to keep themselves fed. What could he have done?’<sup>58</sup>

### Raising Mixed-Race GI Children

In July 1942 the Chief Constable of Oxford in a letter to the Home Office had expressed anxiety about the possible consequences of the presence of black GIs: ‘every step must be taken to stop British women misconducting themselves with coloured troops, if for no other reason than that we do not desire to have a certain proportion of the population semi-coloured in rural districts in this Country in the future.’<sup>59</sup> When children were born to black GIs in Britain they were usually not referred to as ‘semi-coloured’ but as ‘half-caste’, although the African-American press labelled them descriptively and more positively as ‘brown babies’.<sup>60</sup> There was much ambivalence, even hostility, in Britain towards ‘half-castes’ and their mothers. Davenport wrote three articles about these children for *Reynolds News* in early 1947. In response he received a lot of letters, some of which were from women describing how determined they were to keep their babies: ‘they have fought down prejudice and the hostility of parents and found jobs and homes in which they can build new lives.’<sup>61</sup> Mothers frequently faced a great deal of pressure to give up their mixed-race, illegitimate offspring. When Monica’s mother gave birth to Monica she was a twenty-six-year-old single woman still living at home with her father, looking after her six younger brothers and sisters. Her mother had died when she was ten and as the oldest daughter she was obliged to leave school immediately to care for her siblings. Monica recalls her mother’s account of the situation facing her on Monica’s birth:

She was pressured horrendously to give me up ... to have me adopted or to have me put in a home ... she wouldn’t allow it in the end but she was persuaded a lot because my grandfather was Roman Catholic and the local Catholic priest put a lot of pressure on her ... and on Granddad too .... They arranged a place for Mum in a mother and

baby home in Liverpool where she would go in, have the child ... It would be adopted and she would come home and nobody would know about it ... but she refused.

When she came home with a *black* baby her father was horrified: 'there was a big row in the house, Granddad threatened that she had to leave, she couldn't stay there no longer.' Although he later forgave her, Monica reflects:

I think her life was virtually nearly over. She never went out for a long, long time. She sort of stayed at home with me. Granddad was difficult to live with ... you know, he'd got used to me, the baby, but never trusted Mum after that and she couldn't go very far, he kept a tight rein on her, sort of thing. I don't think she was probably wanting to go very far after that time because it was a bit of a scandal, you know having a mixed-race child. Her brothers were particularly cruel to her after she had me. 'You're not going out. We've got to keep an eye on you.' They controlled her.<sup>62</sup>

Dave G's mother also faced familial opposition:

One of my aunties particularly, and one uncle, were not enamoured with the idea of him [his father] associating with my mum ... When I was born, those same ones were, you know: 'Really, is this the wisest thing to be doing, you know, keeping this, this child?' But Mum being my mum, and - I'll say feisty [laughs] person that she was - *strong* character that she was, decided that - yeh, she was going to keep me. I mean, who wouldn't want to?! But she, she was *adamant* she was going to. ... The character of my mum, that she was - I'll use this word 'ballsy' enough to actually hang on to me, keep me.<sup>63</sup>

Karen's mother was disowned by her family. Karen remembers:

It was my mum's family, they just shunned her, they just ... it was horrible, you know. I can remember walking down the street with her and she said, they were walking here, her mum and her dad, and she said 'hello' to them and they just ignored her ... my

mum's sister Gladys, if she saw me walking down the road, she would cross over the road in case she had to tell people who I was.

It was not simply her mother's family that condemned her: the widespread view, suggests Karen, was: 'this one has had a baby to a black man because that's how people thought wasn't it? All they see is if you've got a black baby, you've been with a black man.'<sup>64</sup> Henry's memory of his mother being spat at for having a black child was probably not uncommon.<sup>65</sup> The maternity of a woman with a black child was thereby simultaneously sexualised and demonised. Mothers of mixed race children like those of Monica, Dave G, Karen and Henry, who kept their babies despite familial and neighbourhood disapproval and pressure, actively defied racial prejudice, although sometimes with awful consequences, as in the case of Monica's mother who was a virtual prisoner in her home. John S's mother suffered something similar. She ran a guest house in Weymouth and had an affair with a black GI when her husband was away during the war. Her husband came home after the war to find John, who had been born in May 1945. 'Well, he punished my mum till the day she died. He punished her for what she did. She wasn't allowed out. I mean, I look back now, and I think...She was allowed to go shopping from 10 to 12 on a Thursday, and that was it.'<sup>66</sup>

Despite all the abuse and pressure which mothers of these children were subjected to, a little over half of the 'brown babies' that I know of were kept by their mothers or grandmothers rather than being placed in children's homes. In Germany apparently three quarters of 'brown babies' were kept by their (predominantly white) birth mothers or other relatives.<sup>67</sup> Racism was far more acute in Germany than in Britain which would suggest that it was even harder for white German women to keep their mixed-race children. I cannot claim the representativeness of my sample of a little over sixty, and we cannot assume that the German figures are comparable, but it certainly seems the case that a sizeable number of the mixed-race GI babies in Britain stayed with one or more member of their birth families.

Where British mothers of ‘brown babies’ were already married (estimated as applying to over a third of the babies’ mothers)<sup>68</sup> the couple usually separated, but an occasional husband would agree to take the child as his own. Carole T’s mother was already married; she and her husband parted for a time as her mum would not give up her illegitimate baby. The husband then reappeared and suggested that ‘he’d take me on ... if mum went back to him with Beryl, my sister. He would take me on and give me his name, but I was never legally adopted.’ Carole called her step-father (who had ginger hair) ‘dad’. When she was aged five or six he made her mother tell her about her biological father:

So, my mum called me in, sat me down at the kitchen table, explained to me what had happened and showed me actually at the time a photo and a couple of letters she had, but to be honest at that age I just thought ‘oh good, I’m a bit different, I’ve got an American dad’ and then with that I was out to play again.

But when her mother and step-father rowed, Carole would be mentioned: ‘I stuck out like a sore thumb, I was just a reminder I suppose of what Mum had done’.<sup>69</sup> As Karen suggests, the reminder was that the mother had adulterously ‘been with a black man.’

When James A was born, his mother was already married with four children aged between two and ten. His skin colour made it obvious he was not the son of her husband and he and his mother were forced to leave the marital home; further, ‘she was told that she couldn’t have anything to do with the [other four] children.’ His grandmother and husband (James’s step-grandfather) eventually took in James and his mother, but insisted that James be put in a home. His mother approached the Children’s Society when James was five months old. In October 1945, when James was eleven months, and after a lot of paperwork, including a statement of recommendation from her local vicar, he was accepted at one of the Society’s homes near Leeds – over seventy-five miles from where his mother lived in Long Eaton, Derbyshire. James’s mother only ever saw this as a short-term measure; she visited James

regularly and was very keen to have him back, but a number of obstacles stood in the way. One problem was that she had poor health, not helped by her ex-husband refusing to be reconciled, which had 'left her a very broken and nerve wracked woman', according to Miss Wilden, a Welfare Officer.<sup>70</sup> She also had to look after her own mother, who was frequently ill. The biggest barrier was her difficulty in getting a house of her own, even when she remarried in 1949. She and her new husband Reg had to live with her mother and step-father, as she informed the Children's Society in a (handwritten) letter in February 1950:

I live in my mother's house and she does *not* agree to James coming home. Recently she was very upset by remarks made by people living near as her heart is very bad, in fact the Dr.[sic] told me any excitement or worry bringing on an attack could prove fatal. We have been to the specialist, there is no cure. For months we have been trying to get a house in another district. You see I have four other children living in the same town [Long Eaton] and it is thought it would not be fair to either James or them. My only hope of happiness with James would be if I could get a home of my own as when any dispute arises I am also told to get rooms of my own; you see how difficult it is.<sup>71</sup>

Her mother had angina, and one can imagine that the threat of death through worry was used as a powerful argument against James ever coming to live with them. The reference to her mother being 'very upset by remarks made by people living near' appears to refer to her daughter having a black child.

It was not until May 1953, when James was eight and a half, that his mother finally managed to get her son permanently away from the children's home. In fact he had been in hospital for over a year with T.B. Although his mother and step-father were still living with his grandmother, a council house of their own was imminent and his grandmother appears to have relented to a short stay. It was just as well that James did not have to return to the Children's Society home in Wakefield run by a Mr G.F. Flynn, for James well remembers how 'he wasn't

a particularly nice man, and he had a walking stick and knew how he used to use it.’<sup>72</sup> James suggestively misremembers his name as Mr ‘Flint’; a ‘flint’ is a hard, sharp piece of rock; Mr Flynn/Flint sounds like a hard man who in his six-monthly reports on James always described him as ‘stubborn’. For example, in October 1950 Mr Flynn suggested that James ‘needs a firm hand, he is a very stubborn boy,’<sup>73</sup> which to Flynn presumably justified the beatings. James’s mother persevered and finally reclaimed her son. Mr Flynn agreed to James’s return to his mother because James would have a bedroom of his own, the mother’s new bungalow was nearly ready and ‘he will need very careful nursing and individual care [since he was still convalescing from illness]’.<sup>74</sup> Thankfully he had only been under Mr Flynn’s ‘care’ for two years – from February 1950 until March 1952, when he had been admitted to hospital. James got on very well with his new step-father and his life took a happier course.

Not all the ‘brown babies’ had grandmothers like James’s. Some of the letters in response to Davenport’s article in *Reynolds News* were from grandparents who had taken over the care of these children ‘in order that their daughters can make a fresh start.’<sup>75</sup> Joyce’s mother, Frances, a bus conductress, was living with her parents during the war and had concealed her pregnancy. In January 1945 her younger sister, Molly, aged ten, found her in her bedroom giving birth and rushed downstairs. Joyce narrates: ‘and she came down and she said “Frances has had a baby!” and my nan said “don’t talk silly” she said. She [Molly] said, “well you go up and have a look”... My nan never knew right up until I was born.’ Frances wanted to give Joyce up for adoption, but Joyce’s grandparents wanted to keep her – they loved children, and although they already had seven of their own, they happily took her on as their eighth:

My grandmother sent a telegram straight to my granddad, he was in China and said ‘Frances had a baby, a little girl’ and he sent a telegram back and said... ‘if we can name her Joyce we’ll keep her, we’ll bring her up as our own’ ... ‘Joyce’ because they lost a little girl called Joyce.

They legally adopted her when she was aged five.<sup>76</sup> Pauline's grandmother also played a huge and important part in her life. 'After I was born, my mother and I lived at my grandparents' home, Granny cared for me when my mum was at work. When I was three and a half Mum married a Southampton man, we moved to a new house and they went on to have two daughters'. Tragically, when Pauline was eight, her mother died suddenly.

It was decided that Granny would raise me. I went back to my first home where I had previously lived with my grandparents and my youngest aunt, Aunty Diann .... Granny once told me when my mum was still single with me, she, my mum, asked that Granny would raise me, in the event of anything happening to herself. Another time Granny told me that 'if your father Paul had come back for you, we wouldn't have let him have you anyway, you are OUR Pauline!' On various letters and forms requiring a parent's signature for my schools, Granny signed herself 'Legal Guardian'. I was never aware of any legal documentation regarding Granny being my Legal Guardian although I am happy that she was!<sup>77</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

The desperation felt by some women who bore illegitimate, mixed-race children is illustrated cogently and tragically by the story of Lillian. Lillian's husband was in the RAF and away for over a year. When he returned at the end of the war he found his wife pregnant and threw her out of the house. He sent his two children to Dr Barnardo's; they were simply told that their mother had died. Recently, on receiving documents from Dr Barnardo's, Mary discovered what had happened to her mother. Her mother had been rejected not only by her husband but also by her parents. She bore a mixed race child, Malcolm, and in August 1946, living in a very poorly-furnished room in Plymouth, Devon, she borrowed money for the gas meter from her neighbour and then proceeded to gas both herself and her four-month-old baby. The local paper

(*Western Morning News*) describes the child's father as 'an American negro naval rating', and that she had 'been in desperate financial straits'. The paper relates 'how the woman had worried because neighbours "talked" about her child, which was always well nourished and to which the mother was very devoted.'<sup>78</sup> Her poverty, rejection and the apparent hostility from neighbours led Lillian to this act of utter desolation. There may well have been other women who acted likewise.

As Webster points out: 'Women who flouted the requirements of sexual patriotism lost any claims to be regarded as "our women" or "our sweethearts". Defined by their sexuality, they disgraced the nation.'<sup>79</sup> They disgraced the nation further by their deviant maternity. Women's maternal status has generally been key to their national identity and a definer of their patriotism, but mothers who bore illegitimate, mixed-race children during or soon after the war were deemed unpatriotic and their maternity labelled aberrant. Such women and their babies fell outside the parameters of the national community – this was seen by some as verging on treachery. As Rose perceptively observes: 'Wartime is an especially prime historical moment ... for identifying and excluding those who do not exemplify particular national virtues.'<sup>80</sup> The mothers of mixed-race babies may not have displayed the virtue of sexual continence, yet they were decidedly courageous in keeping their babies. The war required great bravery from its citizens; the women who kept their babies, possibly over half of the women who bore mixed-race children during the war, bravely defied racial prejudice and often family opposition too. Sometimes it was grandmothers who took on the burden of caring for their mixed-race grandchildren; they were also likely to have been castigated.

Those who, despite the name-calling and rejection, made the often very difficult choice to keep their baby sometimes did so partly because of their feelings for the child's father: their relationships with black GIs during the war often meant a great deal to them. Heather reflected: 'what she did tell me, and she - and she even said that in front of my stepsisters - that he was

the light of her life. She absolutely really did love him, and ... so that must have been horribly hard for her.’<sup>81</sup> Asked if his mother loved his dad, Dave G replied: ‘With a passion. Through her life, she never forgot.’<sup>82</sup> To end with a quote from Carole T: ‘my mum always said that she never regretted what she did because he was the only man - my father - that she ever loved ... my friend’s mum said she asked him to leave her the baby, she wanted to keep something.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sunday Pictorial* 26 August 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *Sunday Pictorial* 26 August 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Smith (1987) *When Jim Crow met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris); David Reynolds (1996) *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain 1942-1945* (London: HarperCollins); Simon Topping (2013) ‘“The Dusky Doughboys”: interaction between African American soldiers and the population of Northern Ireland during the Second World War’, *Journal of American Studies*, 47, 4, pp. 1131-1154; Simon Topping (2013) ‘Laying down the law to the Irish and the coons: Stormont’s response to American racial segregation in Northern Ireland during the Second World War’. *Historical Research*, vol. 86, no. 234, pp. 741-759; Juliet Gardiner (1992) *‘Over Here’: the GIs in Wartime Britain* (London: Collins & Brown); Leanne McCormick (2006) ‘One Yank and They’re Off’: Interaction Between U.S. Troops and Northern Irish Women, 1942-1945, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 15 (2), pp 228-257; see pp. 244-5 on black GIs.

<sup>4</sup> Sonya Rose (1997) Girls and GIs: Race, Sex, and Diplomacy in Second World War Britain, *International History Review*, 19 (1), pp. 146-160; Sonya Rose (1998) Sex, Citizenship and the Nation in World War II Britain, *American Historical Review*, 103 (4), pp. 1147-1176; Sonya Rose (2003) *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp. 71-90.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Webster (2013), ‘“Fit to Fight, Fit to Mix’: Sexual Patriotism in Second World War Britain’, *Women’s History Review*, vol 22, 4, p609.

<sup>6</sup> ‘United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War’, September 1942, PREM 4/26/9, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London . According to Reynolds *Rich Relations* , p. 227 and Smith *When Jim Crow met John Bull* p. 192 there were only 130,000 black GIs in the UK on D-Day.

<sup>7</sup> On the setting up of Home Intelligence see Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang (eds) (2010) *Listening to Britain* (London: The Bodley Head) Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 10 September 1942, p. 10, INFI/292, TNA..

<sup>9</sup> Webster, ‘“Fit to Fight, Fit to Mix”’ pp. 607-624.

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds, *Rich Relations* p. 307.

<sup>11</sup> Summerfield, P & N Crockett (1992) ‘“You weren’t taught that with the welding”’: lessons in sexuality in the Second World War’ *Women’s History Review* 1, 3, p. 437.

<sup>12</sup> *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 17 Sept 1942, p. 4, INF1/292,TNA .

<sup>13</sup> FO 371/34126, A6556, TNA.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous [Major General A.A.B. Dowler] ‘Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops’, nd [7 August 1942], annexed to Secretary for War ‘United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom’, Memorandum, September 1942, PREM 4/26/9, TNA.

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<sup>15</sup> Leonora Eyles, *Woman's Own* 12 November 1943.

<sup>16</sup> *British Public Feeling about America: a Report by Home Intelligence Division* (Ministry of Information, June 1943) FO 371/44601TNA.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Richards (2010) *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris); Richard Farmer (2016) *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

<sup>18</sup> 'Notes on Interview with the Adjutant-General War Office: American Army and Air Force. The Colour Bar', July 1942, CO 876/14. TNA.

<sup>19</sup> 'United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom', Memorandum by the Home Secretary, 10 October 1942, PREM 4/26/9,TNA.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Leanne McCormick (2009) *Regulating Sexuality: Women in twentieth-century Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> *British Public Feeling about America*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ormus Davenport, 'U.S. Prejudice dooms 1,000 British Babies', *Reynolds News* 9 February 1947, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Allison Jean Abra (2009), 'On with the Dance: Nation, Culture and Popular Dancing in Britain, 1918-1945' (unpublished PhD, University of Michigan); James Nott (2015) *Going to the Palais: a Social and Cultural History of Dance and Dance Halls in Britain 1918-1960* (Oxford University Press).

<sup>24</sup> Allison Jean Abra (2009), 'Doing the Lambeth Walk: Novelty Dances and the British Nation', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 346–369.

<sup>25</sup> *Picture Post*, 17 July 1943.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Gardiner 'Over Here', p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Leanne McCormick (2006) "'One Yank and They're Off': Interaction between U.S. Troops and Northern Irish Women, 1942-1945', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 15, No. 2, p.244.

<sup>28</sup> *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 19 Aug 1942, p.5, INF1/292, TNA.

<sup>29</sup> *Home Intelligence Monthly Review*, 8 June 1944.

<sup>30</sup> *British Public Feeling about America*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> See Lucy Bland and Frank Mort (1984) "'Look our for the Goodtime Girl": Dangerous Sexualities as a Threat to National Health', in *Formations of Nation and People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

<sup>32</sup> Penny Summerfield (1989) *Women Workers in the Second World War* (London: Routledge); Penny Summerfield (1998) *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

<sup>33</sup> See Claire Langhamer (1997) 'Love and Courtship in Mid-Twentieth Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 19, 1, pp. 146–60. And see Sabine Lee (2011) "A Forgotten Legacy of the Second World War: GI Children in Post-War Britain and Germany," *Contemporary European History*, vol 20, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Home Intelligence Weekly Report*, 2 June 1944.

<sup>35</sup> *Rose Which People's War?* pp. 71-90.

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<sup>36</sup> George Padmore (1947) 'British League Flays Rumor; finds only 1,700 Tan GI Babies', *Chicago Defender*, 17 May, p. 2; Malcolm Joseph-Mitchell (1949) 'The Colour Problem among Juveniles', talk to Kathleen Tacchi-Morris's International School in Somerset on 9 October, DDTCM/15/14: 3-4, Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Lynn Abrams (2010) *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> On the importance and the difficulties of oral history see Abrams *Oral History Theory*; Alessandro Portelli (1981) 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, issue 12, pp. 96-107; Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembryzkycki (eds) (2013) *Oral History Off the Record* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Sandra, 28 October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Carole T, 9 September 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Joyce, 12 August 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with James A, 19 April 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Trevor, 15 July, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Pauline, 17 April 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Norman Longmate (1975) *The GIs: the Americans in Britain, 1942-1945* (London: Hutchinson), p.132.

<sup>47</sup> Email from John Carter Wood, Summer 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Carole T, 9 September 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Dave G, 23 June 2016.

<sup>51</sup> *The Chicago Defender* 28 April, 1945, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ormus Davenport, *Reynolds News* 9 February 1947 p. 2 'U.S. Prejudice dooms 1,000 British Babies'.

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds *Rich Relations* , p. 231.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds *Rich Relations* , p. 232.

<sup>55</sup> Davenport *Reynolds News* 9 February 1947, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Karen, 1 September 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Heather, 2 September 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Heather, 1 Sept 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from T.E. Johnson, Chief Constable of Oxford to Under Secretary of State, Home Office, 22 July 1942. HO 45/25604, TNA.

<sup>60</sup> See *Pittsburgh Courier* 12 February 1949 and 19 February 1949; *Plain Dealer* 25 April 1947.

<sup>61</sup> Davenport *Reynolds News* 9 February 1947, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Dave G, 23 June 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Karen, 1 September 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Janet Baker (2000), 'Lest We Forget': The Children We Left Behind' (MA thesis, University of Melbourne), p. 79.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with John S, 20 June 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria (2003) "Germany's "Brown Babies" must be Helped! Will you?": U.S. Adoption Plans for Afro-German Children, 1950-1955," *Callaloo*, vol 26, no 2, p. 344.

<sup>68</sup> See for example Sylvia McNeill (1949) *Illegitimate Children Born in Britain of English Mothers and Coloured Americans: Report of a Survey* (London: League of Coloured Peoples) p.9, MH55/1656, TNA, which found nearly as many married mothers as unmarried mothers with 'brown babies', although arguably this study over-represented married women, as they were more likely to want to relinquish their children. However a study on illegitimacy in Birmingham for 1944-45 found that over a third of the mothers of illegitimate children were married, while in Southsea the figure was just under half. Sheila Ferguson and Hilde Fitzgerald (1954) *History of the Second World War: Studies in the Social Services* (London: HMSO) p. 98.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Carole T, 9 September 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from E. Wilden to A.R. Vaughan, Secretary of the Children's Society, 6 May 1948, Archives of the Children's Society (in James' possession).

<sup>71</sup> Letter from James's mother to the Children's Society, 1 February, 1950, Archives of the Children's Society (in James' possession).

<sup>72</sup> Interview with James A, 19 April 2016.

<sup>73</sup> 14 October 1950 Church of England, Children's Society Report, signed GF Flynn, Bede House, Wakefield, Archives of the Children's Society (in James' possession).

<sup>74</sup> Letter from G.F. Flynn to Mr Board, 11 May 1953, Archives of the Children's Society (in James' possession).

<sup>75</sup> Davenport (1947) *Reynolds News* 9 February, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Joyce, 12 August 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Pauline, 17 April 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Information from Mary, Lillian's daughter, September 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Webster, "Fit to Fight, Fit to Mix" p. 612.

<sup>80</sup> Rose *Which People's War?* p. 72.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Heather, 1 September 2016

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Dave G, 23 June 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Carole T, 9 September 2014.