***Journal of Transatlantic Studies,* 18 (3), 333-352, 2020**

# Born to Black GIs: from the demonization of father and child to the search for American roots

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## The arrival in Britain of black GIs.

President Roosevelt’s re-election in early November 1940 had relied heavily on the black vote, and seizing an opportunity to make demands, in September that year black leaders had met with Roosevelt to press for racial integration of the military and an end to discrimination in the defense industries.[[1]](#footnote-1) The black leaders presented him with a seven-point programme of demands, including desegregation, training of black officers and the opening of all branches of the army air corps to black Americans.[[2]](#footnote-2) A few days later the War Department announced that African Americans would be admitted to the military in the same proportion as that of US’s black population as a whole, namely ten percent.[[3]](#footnote-3) Officer training expanded: there were only five black officers before the US entered the war in December 1941 (of which three were chaplains), rising to 7,000 by the end, although they were never allowed to command white troops. A black flying programme at Tuskagee, Alabama, was established (the Tuskegee pilots were widely respected during the war).[[4]](#footnote-4) Many black Americans believed that if they could fight and die for their country, how could they be denied equality. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor**,** Hawaii, in December 1941, the US finally joined the war. Already in place was the 1940 Selective Training and Service Act, which required able-bodied men aged twenty-one to thirty-five to serve in the military for at least one year.[[5]](#footnote-5) The US War Secretary did not want blacks in the military and he certainly did not want them to bear arms; he thought they could not be trusted to fight, labelled by the black press the ‘Negro-is-too-dumb-to-fight’ policy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Britain, there was also government reluctance to welcome black American servicemen. In August 1942, the British War cabinet asserted that it was ‘justified in pressing the United States authorities to reduce as far as possible the number of coloured troops sent to this country’. The following month the Secretary for State for War, James Grigg, presented the reasons for this position in his memorandum ‘United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom’. ‘TO BE KEPT UNDER LOCK AND KEY’ was blazened in red ink at the top of the document, such was the desired secrecy. In the memo, Grigg proclaimed that

The average white American soldier does not understand the normal British attitude to the colour problem, and his respect for this country may suffer if he sees British troops, British Women’s Services and the population generally drawing no distinction between white and coloured… This difference of attitude might clearly give rise to friction. Moreover, the coloured troops themselves probably expect to be treated in this country as in the United States, and a markedly different treatment might well cause political difficulties in America at the end of the war. Finally, from the point of view of the morale of our own troops… it is most undesirable that there should be any unnecessary association between American coloured troops and British women, whether civilian or in the Forces.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Attached to this memo was a paper headed ‘Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops’ written by Major-General Dowler, in charge of Southern Command, where a large proportion of black GIs were stationed. In this explicitly racist article, effectively ratified by the War Office, Dowler asserted: ‘white women should not associate with coloured men. It follows then, they should not walk out, dance, or drink with them.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

The British government may not have wanted black GIs to come to Britain but come they did. The exact number of black GIs is not known; as mentioned, President Roosevelt had pledged to black American leaders that ten percent of the wartime troops would be African-American.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the event, black troops in the European Theatre of Operations probably only ever constituted seven and a half to eight percent.[[10]](#footnote-10) Approximately three million American troops passed through Britain in the period 1942–1945 which gives for black GIs a figure in the region of 240,000, although of course never that number at any one time.[[11]](#footnote-11) On arrival the general public generally greeted the black GIs with enthusiasm. Reports from the Home Intelligence Unit (set up in November 1939 to monitor British morale) frequently mentioned people’s appreciation of ‘the extremely pleasing manners of the coloured troops.’[[12]](#footnote-12) As writer George Orwell expressed it: ‘The general consensus of opinion appears to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes.’[[13]](#footnote-13) White GIs in contrast were often thought brash, boastful and rude, although all the GIs were commended for their generosity.

Britons emphasised British racial tolerance, in contrast to the Americans; as African-American journalist Roi Ottley observed: ‘the average Englishman, as I came to know him, relishes the luxury of denouncing racial prejudice in America; often he is snootily superior about the American’s inability to solve the Negro problem.’[[14]](#footnote-14) But to Ottley ‘British racial prejudice is less turbulent and often more subtle than prejudice in the US.’[[15]](#footnote-15) He had visited Britain during the war, registering attitudes first-hand. British prejudice was not so subtle when it came to black servicemen forming relationships with local women. To Ottley: ‘Notwithstanding the widespread Negro associations with white women in the British Isles, and a public tolerance seemingly, Englishmen have a deeply ingrained horror of such relations.’ Ottley called it England’s ‘racial double-talk’.[[16]](#footnote-16) For although Britons stressed their tolerance they did not necessarily condone intimacy, indeed were often hostile to interracial sex and marriage. The British government did not want black GIs to fraternise with British women and neither did many of the public. While most were committed to being friendly, polite and welcoming hosts, what historian Wendy Webster usefully refers to as ‘friendly but brief’, many people, particularly British men and the older generation of both sexes, drew the line at sexual relations.[[17]](#footnote-17) As a *Home Intelligence Report* in August 1942 noted: ‘adverse comment is reported over girls who “walk out” with coloured troops.’[[18]](#footnote-18) A year later complaints continued about Americans’ ‘behaviour with young girls and married women (especially where coloured troops are concerned)’.[[19]](#footnote-19) These ‘young girls and married women’ however often preferred black GIs to white. A report by Mass-Observation in January 1943 offered an explanation: compared to loudmouthed white American soldiers:

the negro’s approach to the white girl is entirely different. He is awed and flattered that she should speak to him at all. All he wants is the honour and glory of actually having a white girl for his friend. He gets the same generous pay as the white soldier, and he is prepared to spend it all on the girl and quite often expect nothing in return save her company.[[20]](#footnote-20)

If these women in relationships with black GIs went on to have their child, they faced a barrage of criticism. By October 1943 the Home Intelligence Unit was noting people’s rising concern about ‘the growing number of illegitimate babies, many of coloured men’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Little has been written about these children. The leading text on the presence of black GIs in wartime Britain, - Graham Smith’s ground-breaking *When Jim Crow met John Bull* – briefly mentions three such children, while David Reynolds’ magisterial *Rich Relations: the American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*, which has two chapters on the black GIs, does not mention them at all.[[22]](#footnote-22) Sabine Lee compares British polices towards GI children with the German response but does not address individual cases.[[23]](#footnote-23) Chamion Caballero and Peter Aspinall’s wonderful *Mixed Race Britain in the Twentieth Century* also discusses these mixed-race children, but not in any depth.[[24]](#footnote-24) In response to this gap in the historiography I have recently written the book *Britain’s ‘Brown Babies’: the stories of children born to black GIs and white women in the second world war* in which I have drawn on interviews with over fifty of these children.[[25]](#footnote-25) (The term ‘brown babies’ was coined during the war by the African-American press, a far more positive term than the widely-used ‘half-caste’.) It is estimated that approximately 2,000 ‘brown babies’ were born in Britain during the war. Presumably babies born to white GIs would on occasion have been passed off as the offspring of husbands, if the dates roughly fitted. This initially was the case with one of my interviewees, Babs, born in October 1944. Her mother was married; her husband ‘was in the navy and when he came back from being at sea he honestly believed that I was his child, I think because my complexion at that time was very fair… It took six months for my complexion to change’. She was then packed off to a Dr Barnardo’s Home in Suffolk, one of the many homes of this large British children’s charity.[[26]](#footnote-26) In 1945 a baby on the hospital ward of nurse K. Johnstone in West Bromwich was noticeably brown-skinned from birth. Writing a diary for Mass-Observation, Johnstone records that the baby

had been getting darker complexioned each day. The mother had been getting very worried about it and today she became hysterical and said its father was a Black American soldier. The husband had been looking at the baby very intently during the last day or two and it was decided that the best thing to do was to tell him the truth.

The mother went home with her husband but without the baby.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The children born to black GIs and British women in the war were nearly all illegitimate. This would of course have been the case where the mother or father were already married to other people, but even where couples were single and wanted to marry, their child was born out of wedlock. Every American serviceman had to receive permission to marry from his commanding officer (who in the UK were nearly all white) and avoidance of this permission was a court-martialled offence, but for a black GI wanting to marry a white British woman, permission was invariably refused. According to black former GI Ormus Davenport, writing after the war, the US 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 US under the US government scheme is the wife of a Negro.’[[28]](#footnote-28)

The black American fathers, the white British mothers and the children born of the relationships were all regularly treated with contempt. Some of the men were accused of rape, accusations which may very well have been false. In July 1944 *The Crisis*, the paper of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, reported

a white Southern lieutenant in a Negro anti-aircraft company who just could not stand to see his men enjoying the courtesies extended by the white women of a certain Eastern town [possibly Ipswich]. He posted a notice that *any* type of association with white women is regarded as rape and reminded his men that the penalty for rape during wartime is death.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Thus any relationship between a black GI and a white British woman could have been construed as rape, the justification that had usually been given for lynchings in the American South. Joe, who was put in a children’s home, found out later that his maternal grandparents had identified his black GI father to the commanding-officer, but when his father said he wished to keep his new-born child, he was told that if he maintained a relationship with the mother he would be charged with rape.[[30]](#footnote-30) The black father of another Joe, who was kept by his mother, was actually charged with rape ‘and in the end he was literally handcuffed and shipped out.’[[31]](#footnote-31) David M’s mother gave birth to David when she was sixteen. His father was apparently arrested for rape – possibly because his mother was underage (she might have been only fifteen when she met David’s father). David M reflects:

There was a couple of things …one is the servicemen are not supposed to have babies. And the second thing is, he was black. So that would have made it really terrible for him, because they really hate that, you can imagine, the [white] Americans. He probably had a really hard time, as a result.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The mothers of children born to black GIs were also often treated badly, a number of their children mentioning the hostility and stigma their mothers faced and the taunt of epithets like ‘nigger lover’ and ‘nigger’s bit’. Monica’s mother often got called names in the street:

I remember one time there was a lady from a couple of doors away, her and mum never got on…I remember one day mum and me was sat on the gate where we lived and this lady came past and…hit my mum and she shouted in the street, ‘you nigger lover’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Terry recalls that some people ‘would bang on their metal dustbins whenever my mother walked by. It also became a daily ritual for people to cross the road to avoid my mother rather than speak to her.’[[34]](#footnote-34) Back in 1919, the ‘race riots’ of that year were in part a response of fury from white returning soldiers finding ‘their’ women (any white British women) in relationships with black men. (During the first world war, the greatly increased demands for seamen had led to a huge rise in sailors from the Indian sub-continent, West Africa, Aden, the Yemen, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, the West Indies and China.)[[35]](#footnote-35) While white men felt threatened by miscegenation at a personal level, the British State, of course, took a wider view. At a general level, as Laura Tabili points out, ‘interracial marriage was deplored as a threat to racial boundaries and as a catalyst for racial conflict’.[[36]](#footnote-36) It was no different in the second world war. When Carole B was born in December 1944 to a white mother and a black American serviceman, her mother was disowned by her family. Her mother was twenty-one, single, living in Birkenhead, near Liverpool, and was in the army. Carole B remembers:

My mum’s family, they just shunned her, it was horrible. I can remember walking down the street with her…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.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Henry’s memory of his mother being spat at for having a black child was probably not uncommon.[[38]](#footnote-38) Despite all this abuse, over half the babies were kept by their mothers or grandmothers, often in the face of extreme opposition and no financial aid.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The children also had a difficult time. In the 1930s and ‘40s, Britain was very largely a white country, with an estimated 7,000-8,000 non-white peoples living there before the war, mostly concentrated in seaports.[[40]](#footnote-40) Numbers of black people rose greatly during the war, not only because of the presence of black GIs, but also because of West Indians coming to contribute to the war effort as service personnel (especially in the RAF) and as munitions workers.[[41]](#footnote-41) Nevertheless, soon after the war numbers shrank again for the next few years, and although never back to the pre-war figure, the home counties returned to almost exclusive whiteness.[[42]](#footnote-42) Children born to black GIs were largely living in these counties, as well as East Anglia and the Midlands, for these were the sites where the GIs had been predominately based. In these geographically white areas, many of the mixed-race GI children suffered racism, an acute sense of difference and a lack of racial ‘belonging’. As observed by visiting African-American anthropologist John St Clair Drake: ‘Kindliness to visiting Negro soldiers is one thing. The prospect of a new crop of “half-castes” is another.’

There is a long and ugly history of hostility not only towards inter-racial relationships but also towards the so-called ‘half-caste’. In 1937 a polemic entitled *Half-Caste* by self-defined Eurasian Cedric Dover, while claiming ‘the richness of hybrid potentiality’, also indicated the extent of prejudice facing those of mixed race: ‘The “half-caste” appears in a prodigal literature. It presents him…mostly as an undersized, scheming and entirely degenerate bastard. His father is a blackguard, his mother a whore…But more than all this, he is a potential menace to Western Civilisation, to everything that is White and Sacred.’[[43]](#footnote-43) The existence of ‘half-castes’ represented a challenge to national and racial boundaries and to the neat polarity between the white British and the non-white colonised racial ‘other’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

St Clair Drake was aware of how such children could not be hidden away: ‘The high visibility of the colored illegitimate child made him so conspicuous that the onlooker could never forget what he symbolized.’[[45]](#footnote-45) And what he (or she) symbolised was that the black GIs had indeed lived up to the last two attributes of the ‘over-paid, over-fed, over-sexed, and over here’ caricature. The children were taunted for being illegitimate, black and ‘different’, including being ‘a yank’s’ child. Monica remembers ‘having a row with a girl in the street when I was about thirteen, she said to me, “you should go home, you’re not one of us, you’re a yank’s kid.”’ Monica did not know what this meant, indeed did not at this stage know she had an American father.[[46]](#footnote-46) She was not atypical in not knowing about her father. Those who were adopted were sometimes not even told they were adopted.[[47]](#footnote-47) This was the case with Ann, who was happily adopted aged five:

We had a conversation one day in school about Mary, this other girl of mixed race [in the area]: ‘You do know her father’s American, Ann?’ ‘I know,’ I said, ‘Yes, he's an American soldier’. So the other girl said, ‘Perhaps that’s why you’re that colour, Ann. Your dad’s American!’ I said, “No! He’s in the house!”… No, they [her adoptive parents] never told me a thing. …Until I was 13, and this elderly lady said to me about I should go back where I belong, and then I said, ‘And where is that supposed to be?’ ‘You niggers are all the same,’ she said. ‘And Mr. and Mrs. G- are not your mother and father.’[[48]](#footnote-48)

Some children however were told that they had black American fathers and on occasion took great pride in the fact. Jennifer B, who lived with her grandmother, went on a school trip in 1959 when she was fourteen to Stratford-upon-Avon, to see Shakespeare’s *Othello*. After the show she was lucky enough to meet Paul Robson, who had been playing Othello; he singled her out: ‘I said, “My dad were an American, you know?” He said, [mimics voice] “Was he?” Like that! Very beautiful voice... I met Paul Robeson, and had a kiss off him. I don't think I washed my face for weeks. I was absolutely over the moon.’ Her grandmother used to sing her ‘Ma Curly Headed Baby’ when she was young, a lullaby that Robson had recorded in 1948.[[49]](#footnote-49)

## Searching for American fathers

Most of the children born to black GIs in Britain knew next to nothing about their fathers, and the little they were told was often inaccurate or misleading. It was difficult enough not knowing who their fathers were, but the difficulty was often exacerbated by their learning that their fathers were American: America appeared huge and impossibly far away. Few were as lucky as Jennifer in meeting a famous black American. As already suggested, even where a mother kept her child she often would not fully answer questions about the child’s father. While a mother may have loved the man, she usually believed that there was no future with him, and that she and her child had to make a life without him. Negating him or playing down his existence was one common strategy. Many of the mothers, as Monica reflects: ‘went to the grave and just absolutely refused to give the name of the man…it seemed to be just the same for most of us.’[[50]](#footnote-50) Consequently many of Britain’s ‘brown babies’ did not start looking for their fathers for many years, the barriers seeming too great.

In the 1980s two organisations were set up to try and help in finding US fathers: War Babes, founded by white GI baby Shirley McGlade, and TRACE, set up by Pamela Winfield, a GI bride who returned to Britain as a widow.[[51]](#footnote-51) TRACE is now online and renamed GI-trace.[[52]](#footnote-52) In trying to obtain information about her father in the 1980s, McGlade came up against enormous barriers, as did all the GI babies. This was of course before the arrival of email and the internet. But the greatest barrier was the stone-walling by the US military. One of US military’s excuses for refusing to help was that records had been burnt in 1973 at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, the fire destroying approximately 80% of the military personnel records for Army veterans discharged between 1912 and 1960. There were no back-up records, but remnants from the fire had been retrieved and it did not affect all military veterans. However the US army refused to indulge *any* information, invoking the Privacy Act. With great determination, Shirley McGlade, aided by several US civil rights lawyers, took on the Department of Defense and in 1990 the law was changed; from then on the US military was obliged to help under Freedom of Information legislation.[[53]](#footnote-53) With the recent and extensive use of DNA testing, finding US relatives is now proving a great deal easier, although it is rare that a father is still alive. DNA along with the now helpful NPRC is transforming the success rate of those seeking their US relatives.

When he was young James, one of my interviewees, asked his mother about his father but ‘my mother always said I was not to ask questions in front of Reg [his stepfather] … because it wouldn't be fair. It was rude to do so. So I didn't ask any more questions.’ His mother asked him not to look for his birth father until Reg had died. Reg died in 1985 and some time later James’s daughter galvanised him into searching for his father. James got his original birth certificate and found that his father had registered him, so his army number was included. In about 2000, with the help of GI-trace, James found his father. His father had been a truck driver for the US airforce near Derby in the Midlands. That first moment when James talked to his father on the telephone:

It was a great relief ... Up to that point, I never felt *whole.* There was a part of me missing. And finding me dad was that part. And then I was, I felt whole. I felt better and settled …. Every member of his family, relations, what have you, *all* knew about me. He never kept it a secret. He produced a photograph… which he carried around with him, in his wallet, all that time, all those years. And he hoped that one day I would try and find him …. There was a lot of things to say. It was difficult. Because we were both choked up. Me dad - me mum said that dad cried - that's my American mum - I call her mum. He cried a lot.

James went out and visited him every other year and his father came to England. His father lived until aged ninety-five and they had a wonderful relationship.[[54]](#footnote-54) [James, father and stepmother].

Dave G was unusual in that he was always told about his father by his mother. His mother ‘used to show me his photographs: "This is your dad". [She] loved him, with a passion.’

My birth certificate was sent to the States in ‘49 at his request so that he could sign it, and also he swore an affidavit, which I've got a copy of, saying that I am his son. So he acknowledged me. And I believe that he wanted to - I believe that he wanted to come and sort of take my mum back. But I know - I found out afterwards from a neighbour - that my mum didn't get all the letters that were sent.

It was very probably his grandmother who intervened and took the letters. ‘I think it was in order to protect her from being - a white person married to a black person, possibly, in the States.’ In 1949 his mother married a lovely Scottish man who became, in effect, Dave’s father. But he did not forget his American dad. When Dave was about twelve ‘out of the blue, there arrived a Valentine's card - two Valentine's cards, one to my mum, one to me, and a photograph of him …So I wrote to him, and he wrote another letter back, told him about how I had been getting on at school, my athletic prowess [laughs] and how I was doing.’ This went on for a while then a letter was returned; he must have moved house. Years later, in 1999, Dave’s friend Chris, a Mormon, offered to help. The Mormons – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – own the world’s largest genealogical database, which is run by the non-profit company FamilySearch.[[55]](#footnote-55) (The Church’s founder, nineteenth-century American Joseph Smith, preached the need for church members to offer baptism to all their ancestors – hence the need to trace lineages.) Via access to this database,

Chris had given me this list of possibles with the name Greene in different parts of the States, and I phoned this guy, and I had in my mind that my father's name was David Otis. Mum always thought it his middle name was Otis. I get this list of names, and I think - well OK, I will go through them. I phoned a couple: no, no, this is a white person, ‘my husband's dead’…And I said: ‘Do you mind me asking, is your husband African-American?’ ‘No, he's white and, you know, he's dead.’ Then I spoke to this guy - said: ‘I'm calling from England. I'm trying to locate David Otis Greene’ ‘My name's David *Otto* Greene’ [in angry voice] and he was really stroppy about it - came across really stroppy, quite a refined voice. I thought - crikey! I had a vision of a Germanic person on the other end of the phone getting quite stroppy. I said: ‘OK, sorry to have troubled you’.

Dave got a bit more information about where his father was likely to be living and a few months later he rang this number again:

The guy lives in Brooklyn, New York. Phone rings, he picks it up: ‘The *news* is on! Don't you know the news is on?!’ ‘Yeh, yeh, but I'm phoning from England, and I'm looking for David Otis Greene.’ He said: ‘I'm David *Otto* Greene’. I said ‘well, I'm phoning from Yeovil in Somerset. Were you there during the war?’ He said, ‘Well, yeh, I was.’ ‘Do you know Joan Bagwell?’ ‘Yeh, I do.’ I said: ‘That's my mum…You're my dad!’

Two and a half hours later they were still chatting and then Dave flew out to the US. Being able to meet his father, who he was alike in so many ways, was life-changing for Dave.[[56]](#footnote-56) [Dave G and father]

Lloyd did not know about his father until his early twenties, when he needed his birth certificate in order to join the army. Only then did he find out he was illegitimate. Like a number of the war children I have interviewed, he had assumed his stepfather was his actual father. His mother came down from London to explain:

I said, ‘Well why didn’t you tell me before? … After all the boohooing and the tears and sadness, she *still* wouldn’t tell me about him!... And she didn’t want to talk about it cos it would upset my stepfather. And when I asked my stepfather, he told me he couldn’t talk about it cos it would upset my mother! So between them, they didn’t do anything. They wouldn’t tell me.

But his mother did give his father’s name and an address in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Lloyd thought of a clever plan:

I took some sheet music with me. So I went in old people’s homes and, quid pro quo, I played…in return for which they let me ask them questions. But then…most of them had never heard of Wood Way [the area his father was from]. Because when I was there, it was a derelict town. It was like a ghost town, really. It had been a steel-works and very prosperous, but it wasn’t when I got there... And in the end, I wrote to the president. It was when Reagan was on the throne. One of Reagan’s aides replied and gave a telephone number, but they had found the wrong man. When I mentioned colour to the family, his daughter went hysterical. “No! No colour in our family!”’

Then browsing the internet in 2012, he found details of the mayor of Braddock and emailed him. Within two days he got a reply: the mayor had found a cousin. ‘My mother had given me a photograph of myself as a baby. And… one of my relatives sent me a photograph and I thought: “This is identical.” And sure enough, my brother and my sister-in-law had got the original photo.’

They welcomed me straight away…Went to the first reunion, which was 2014…I was thrilled to be there… They’re very religious. We got caught out every meal, I should think, forgetting to say grace. Ooh, I love the church thing. Singing and shouting… and the one we went to - one was just a tin hut there. And it was a female, a woman pastor. And she was so brilliant. And at one point, she lay on the floor. It’s right up my street! That’s how it should be. And the pianist they had, at the same place – they’re in this tin hut, and they’ve just got a piano. She’s a real, mean dirty-blues-playing piano woman.… The last reunion I went to, I’d got my sunglasses on, and a cap. And I was taking my sunglasses off, and she [a relative] shrieked. And she said it was such a shock. She said when I took the sunglasses off she thought she was looking at my father.[[57]](#footnote-57) [photo of Lloyd with US family]

Monica’s mother was very evasive when asked about Monica’s father, saying that he had died in the war. However she did eventually tell Monica his name: ‘She said his name was Mack. I said, “that’s a strange name.” She said, “well that’s his name, that’s all I know about him” and I asked where he was from. She said, “I don’t know, he lived in America”.’ Monicafinallylearned from her mother that her father’s full name was Paris Mack and that he ‘drove a truck between Liverpool Docks and the many US bases around the North West of England’.

I used to spend hours daydreaming, I wonder where he is, I wonder if he’s alive, I wonder what he looks like, I wonder what he does. Has he got married? Has he got a family? It was always on my mind. There was a permanent sadness…all I knew he was Paris Mack and he lived in America.’

In 1985 Monica, aged forty, had to have open heart surgery. Afterwards, she was

plunged into a deep depression…As I started to come to terms with it, I tried to find my way out of it, I decided I had to change things. I’d not been able to be honest in my life because all that had gone before. The race; the colour thing; the feeling imprisoned; the sadness at my dad. The loss of never knowing him and suspecting by this time he’d be dead. The depression crashed in and I figured to get out of it, I had to put things right…I. got divorced, went back to college…and I got to fifty-eight… I thought about dad occasionally, but hadn’t done anything.

That year, 2002, her son showed her how to use a computer.

He said, ‘well, give me the name of something you want information on’. I said ‘my dad’s name was Paris Mack’… He knew the GI story and all the background but he was nothing we talked about anymore, it had been too long… Well, he put it in, he said, ‘look mum, found him’. I said, ‘oh yeah.’ He said, ‘no, come and have a look’, and I walked over and looked at the computer screen and there was like a sort of official form…It was a social security death index...He died in 1994, eight years previously. ‘Don’t touch it!’... I had a moment then, I don’t know, like the breath just left my body… and he said, ‘I won’t touch it. It won’t go away. I can get it back again.’…There was a military number….I wrote to Neils Zussblatt [management analyst at the National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis] Just over a week I got a reply back. He [her father] had two sisters that were older than him who was still alive in their eighties - Alola and Edna - no wife’s name on it and there was no children at his funeral. So, I rang one night. I kept putting it off… The girl in the library in Indiana had given me the number…and an elderly lady answered and she had a deep southern accent… oh, it was wonderful but it was a bit difficult because she was hard of hearing, she couldn’t understand a lot and then she got a bit confused and upset. The phone went dead, that happened a few times. Anyhow, the phone didn’t get answered for a week and I thought, ‘oh no I blew it’. So, I started ringing the other sister, but again she was very elderly and it was hard for her. I said, ‘is there anyone else there I can speak to, please?’ So I phoned back whenever it was, a few hours later, and this other lady said, ‘I don’t know what you’re ringing here for but this must be a joke. Paris has died and he’s not alive anymore, please don’t ring and upset my mum’. Anyhow, that phone got put down again, it didn’t go very well… so I was floundering a little bit but I rang back the first address; I decided I’d leave a message on the answer phone…I said ‘my name is Monica, this is my telephone number, I’m calling from the UK. Paris was friendly with my family when he was over here…if I could get in touch with anybody’…It took a few days but one day my phone at home rang, again this voice - southern but younger and she said ‘hi, I’m Judy, I’m Edna’s daughter…you’ve been calling, we thought it was a joke at first’…I decided to go for it at this point: ‘I believe Paris Mack was my father.’ She said, ‘your father! What do you mean?’ I said, ‘well, do you know he was a veteran in World War two and he was in England? I was born in 1944’…All my life I’d been waiting for this moment and she said, ‘oh my God! Can this be real?’ I said, ‘it’s a lot to tell you in a phone call, can I write to you?’ I sat down and wrote this letter off to Judy telling her all about myself. I was searching for my dad…. I sent a bunch of pictures…she phoned me back when she got those things. She said, ‘oh my gosh, you’re my cousin, you’re my biological cousin and you’re English!’…she believed it straight away…If my health had been OK I would have tried to go just to see his grave, just to stand there where he’s buried to see where - he was born in Mississippi - to go down to that place. I feel a deep connection to him. She sent me photographs of him and the family and it was like all my birthdays and Christmas came at once when I looked at those photos.

Her daughter ‘walked in and she looked and looked at it [a photo of Monica’s dad] and she just burst into sobs… I said “what, tell me?” “Oh my God, it’s you, it’s you but in a male sort of face!”’ Monica feels that it has transformed her life; ‘I am so joyful. I don’t actually need anything else. That’s my dad. I know who I am and it just wipes out all the pain. All the emptiness and all the sadness. Full circle, just peace and joy.’’[[58]](#footnote-58) [2 photos side by side: 1) Monica 2) her father]

Carole T’s mother was already married with a child when Carole was born in April 1945. When her husband returned from the navy and found Carole he began divorce proceedings but then stopped when he discovered that he would not get custody of their daughter. Carole called her stepfather ‘Dad’ and only learnt about her father when she was about five or six:

I was out playing and they called me in because they used to row a lot about it actually and my stepdad was having a rant and he said that it was time I was told. 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 stepfather argued, Carole’s birth was often a point of contention: he would say ‘that bastard of yours’. ‘I stuck out like a sore thumb, I was just a reminder I suppose of what mum had done.’[[59]](#footnote-59) Once Carole was born and her father had returned to the US:

he used to send money for me but she [her mother] said one day she had this letter turn up from his wife, he was married…She’d obviously found out but she said it was not a nasty bitchy letter. It was a nice letter and she said that it said that she understood what had happened and that because with the war on and that, where everybody didn’t know whether they were going to be here from one day to the next, so she said she understood all that but would Mum please stop writing to him because half of him wants to be back here and it was tearing him apart. Mum said if it had been a nasty letter, she would have probably carried on but because it was such a nice letter, she just felt it was the right thing to stop.

When Carole was thirty and her mother was fifty-four:

we were walking along and… she said, ‘I often wonder what happened to your father’… I said, ‘I wonder if there was any way we could find out.’ She said, ‘Oh would you?’ I said, ‘yeah I’d love to find out what happened to him….What would my surname have been if I took my dad’s name, my real dad’s name?’ She said, ‘Burden’, I’m sure she said Burden…. He was only known as Bert. … and then within a week she was taken ill, they took her into hospital for gastroenteritis and she never come out. So we never even got started.’

Carole had asked her mother

‘what happened to the photo and the letters?” She said, ‘I don’t know…I used to hide them under the lino’… She was in and out of hospital a lot and she said ‘when I was in hospital at some time he [her husband] must have found them and got rid of them’.

Carole T has been searching for her US family for over forty years. Now at last, through the wonders of DNA matching, she has found out that her father was called Archie Burton and he was in the coast guards before, during and after the war. Unfortunately he had died in 2004. She has contacted some American relatives but frustratingly they have not yet responded. Receiving a message or telephone call from an unknown person out of the blue can understandably raise suspicions, as was the case with Monica’s relatives, but Carole is hopeful that they will eventually respond. She has at least been sent his photograph by the US military record office; she looks very like him. [photo of her dad]And she knows she was born of love: her mother ‘always said that she never regretted what she did because she said he was the only man - my father - that she ever loved.’[[60]](#footnote-60)

These stories are greatly moving as well as demonstrating impressive perseverance in the face of huge obstacles. Finding their fathers or relatives or simply seeing photographs gave the ‘brown babies’ a sense of completeness and often racial pride that many had lacked. They felt a sense of wholeness and the connection to the United States is a central part of what they see as their long-lost heritage. Being partly ‘American’ is crucial to the identity of many of them, even where no relatives have (yet) been found. I asked them how they identify themselves on the census form. In the 2001 census, ‘mixed’ was first introduced as a category, with the choices ‘white and black Caribbean’, ‘white and black African’, ‘white and Asian’ and ‘any other mixed background’. There is no box for ‘white and *African-American’*. Most tick ‘other’ then put ‘Afro-American’. James for example commented: ‘I often, with these boxes, put…"Anglo-Black-African-American"…I love putting that in the "other"…just to throw one back!’ However interviewee Elaine, who found her father in December 1996, feels very ambivalent about America: ‘Thinking of the African part of who I am – I love the music…feel comfortable with black people. The heritage of the music and the dance’. But she hates ‘the dark side of what happened to my people’. And she is ‘not overwhelmed by American culture – I hate cars and shopping malls. I think my passion was about finding my dad and his family rather than the American side… finding the missing part within me, their story.’[[61]](#footnote-61)

## Concluding thoughts

The black GIs who had come to Britain in the 1940s were initially received positively. Once they started to have relationships with local women, attitudes changed. As children were born of these relationships, hostility grew. The black GIs, the British mothers of their children and the children themselves were frequently demonized. While probably more than half the mothers (or grandmothers) kept their children, the others were put in children’s homes. Where mothers were already married, the child were sometimes kept, with or without the husband still in tow, but in the majority of cases the child was relinquished, the child seen as an ‘accident’ of the upheavals and excitement of war. Even where mothers kept their mixed-race children, the father was rarely thought of as part of their and their child’s future. Years later however, the children, now adults, often middle-aged, wanted desperately to find the fathers they never knew. As Elaine expresses it: ‘that intense longing to find and to know where one comes from and that sense of roots and belonging underpins many of those who have the courage to go and search.’[[62]](#footnote-62) They embarked on a search that for some led them to their fathers or at least to their American relatives: half-siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts. Meeting their American fathers or relatives or simply seeing photographs has given them a sense of wholeness.Sandi, who had been placed in a children’s home by her married mother, ‘had no history of my own…I needed to know all this and understand it.’ Finding her father’s American wife and hearing that her father always talked of her was a turning point:

I was like tumbleweed. You know – when you see them cowboy films and the tumbleweed’s just blowing about where the wind takes it. I was like that. And I was aware of it, but I didn’t how to change it. And it’s about roots. It’s your roots that stabilise you.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Sandi’s new sense of rootedness demonstrates clearly that a sense of belonging is not simply about where you grew up or live but how you feel placed in the world, including your story of origin. But finding about fathers so late in life is a mixed blessing. To Elaine, the whole experience has been for her ‘a joyful heartache as well as a painful heartache… When you do find out about your father, you realise what you missed’.[[64]](#footnote-64) As Monica expresses it: ‘it’s just a pity it took until I was so old before I found anything out about dad.’[[65]](#footnote-65) Thus the presence of black Americans had an important impact on the lives of certain Britons, not only during the war, but subsequently, as the children of wartime liaisons searched and still search for their African-American fathers.

What about the impact on the African Americans themselves? Where they knowingly left babies behind, it might well have been very painful for them. Sandi was not the only one to discover that her father had always talked of his child back in Britain. Of course there were Britons who had been racist towards the black Americans, but the intimate relationships and friendships that black GIs had forged with white British women and men had in certain ways been transformative. According to Walter White, leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who was in Britain for some of the war: ‘for many of the Negroes, it was their first experience in being treated as normal human beings and friends by white people.’[[66]](#footnote-66)

These positive wartime experiences co-existed with very negative ones. During the war, the hypocrisy of the US fighting fascism yet remaining racist and segregated led in February 1942 to the African-American newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* launching the ‘Double V’ campaign for ‘victory at home and abroad’: victory against Hitler and against Jim Crow.[[67]](#footnote-67) Black American servicemen experienced the racism of their white counterparts all through the war.[[68]](#footnote-68) On returning after the war black former GIs realised only too clearly that despite their wartime contribution, there was no victory against Jim Crow. Arguably, the combination of the positive wartime liaisons of ordinary British and American men and women – the recognition that race relations could be quite different – and the continuity of American racism and discrimination crucially fed into the nascent US civil rights movement.[[69]](#footnote-69) Thus the relationships formed between black Americans and white Britons during the war played a small but possibly significant part in reshaping the racial politics and policies of post-war USA.

1. Hervieux, Linda. 2015. *Forgotten: the untold story of D-Day’s black heroes, at home and at war*. New York: HarperCollins: 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wynn, Neil A. 2010. *The African American Experience during World War 11.* Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield: 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘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 (hereafter TNA), Kew, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Moye. J. Todd. 2010. *Freedom Flyers: the Tuskegee airmen of world war 11*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hervieux, Forgotten: 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid: 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War’, Sept 1942, PREM4/26/9, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anonymous [Major General A.A.B. Dowler] “Notes on Relations with Coloured Troops”, n.d. [7 August 1942], annexed to “United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom”, PREM4/26/9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘United States Coloured Troops in the United Kingdom: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War’, September 1942, PREM 4/26/9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wynn, *The African American Experience*: 53 suggested eight percent, while David Reynolds. 2000. *Rich Relations: the American occupation of Britain, 1942-1945.* London: Phoenix Press: 83 suggests it was 7.4 percent. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Reynolds, *Rich Relations:* 432-433. According to Reynolds, *Rich Relations:* 227, 323 and Smith, Graham. 1987. *When Jim Crow met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War 11 Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris: 192. There were 130,000 black GIs in the UK on D-Day, representing one in thirteen of the GIs – nearly eight percent. Smith’s book remains the leading text on black GIs in wartime Britain. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example *Home Intelligence Weekly Report*, 23 July,1942: 4; 13 August 1942: 5; 19 August 1942: 5, INF1/292. TNA. On the setting up of Home Intelligence see Addison, Paul and Jeremy A. Crang (eds). 2010. *Listening to Britain.* London: Vintage: Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. George Orwell. 3 Dec 1943. *Tribune.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ottley, Roi. 1952. *No Green Pastures*. London: John Murray: 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ottley, *No Green Pastures*: 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ottley, *No Green Pastures*: 25, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Webster, Wendy. 2013. “’Fit to Fight, Fit to Mix’: Sexual Patriotism in Second World War Britain”. *Women’s History Review*, 22, 4: 607-624. Similarly, David Reynolds points to the distinction made by the British between civil rights and sexual wrongs. Reynolds, *Rich Relations*: 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 19 Aug 1942, INF 1/292, TNA. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 5 Aug 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mass-Observation. 22 Jan 1943. *Report of feelings about American and the Americans.* Mass-Observation Archives, University of Sussex. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Home Intelligence Weekly Report* 28 Oct 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Smith,*When Jim Crow met John Bull*, Reynolds, *Rich Relations.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lee, Sabine. 2011. ‘A Forgotten Legacy of the Second World War: GI Children in Post-War Britain and Germany’, *Contemporary European History*, vol 20, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Caballero. Chamion and Peter Aspinall. 2018. *Mixed Race Britain in the Twentieth Century.* London: Palgrave. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bland, Lucy. 2019. *Britain’s ‘Brown Babies’: the stories of children born to black GIs and white women in the second world war*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Interview with Babs, 3 June 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Nurse K. Johnstone. 23 Nov 1945. Mass-Observation Diarist, 5344-947-977, Mass-Observation Archives, University of Sussex. Thanks to Clive Webb for this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Davenport, Ormus. 9 February 1947. “U.S. Prejudice dooms 1,000 British Babies,” *Reynolds’s News:* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Editorial, July 1944. ‘Black and White Rape’, *The Crisis*: 217. Emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Baker, Janet. 2000. ‘”Lest We Forget”: The Children We Left Behind: the life experience of adults born to black GIs and British women during the second world war’. University of Melbourne: unpublished Masters thesis p. 42. Joe also discovered that the children’s home had totally ignored the request from his father’s sister in Chicago to adopt him. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Joe quoted in McGlade, Shirley. 1992. *Daddy, Where are You? The moving story of a daughter’s search for her GI father.* London: Smith Gryphon*:*154. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Interview with David M, 8 Dec 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Interview with Terry, 14 December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jenkins, Jacqueline. 2009. *Black 1919: riots, racism and resistance in imperial Britain,* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press;Bland, Lucy. 2005. ‘White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War’, in *Gender & History* vol. 17, issue 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Tabili, Laura. 1996.‘Women “of a Very Low type”: Cross-Racial Boundaries in Imperial Britain’ in Frader, Laura and Sonya O. Rose (eds*), Gender and Class in Modern Europe* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 165-190, here 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Interview with Carole B, 1 Sept, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Baker, ‘”Lest We Forget”: 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Bland. *Britain’s ‘Brown Babies’*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It is impossible to arrive at exact numbers as the archives generally give no indication of a person’s ethnicity. But Spencer, Ian R. G. 1997. *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The making of multiracial Britain.* London & NY: Routledge: 3, estimates 7,000 Asian and Black people in 1939; Reynolds suggests the number was no more than 8,000. Reynolds *Rich Relations:* 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Sherwood, Marika. 1985. *Many Struggles: West Indian Workers and Service Personnel in Britain (1939-45)*. London: Karia Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In 1947 visiting African-American anthropologist John St Clair Drake estimated the ‘coloured’ population of Britain to be 10-12,000. St Clair Drake, John. (n.d., approx. 1948). (n.d., approx. 1948). ‘Significance of the Study’. Acc 4910, Liverpool Record Office, Liverpool Central Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Dover, Cedric. 1937. *Half-Caste*, London, p.13; Bland, Lucy. 2007. ‘British Eugenics and “Race Crossing”: a Study of an Interwar Investigation’, in Special Issue on ‘Eugenics Old and New’, *New Formations* no. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Rose, Sonya. 1997. ‘Girls and GIs: Race, Sex, and Diplomacy in Second World War Britain’, *International History Review*, vol.19, no.1; [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. St Clair Drake, John. (n.d., approx. 1948). ‘The Brown Baby Problem’, Box 60/15, St Clair Drake Archives, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Only a small number amongst those I have interviewed were adopted, due to adoption societies not wanting to take black or mixed-race children on their books, deeming them ‘too hard to place’. See Bland. *Britain’s ‘Brown Babies’. C*hapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Interview with Ann, 26 Nov 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Interview with Jennifer B, 14 Dec 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Interview with Monica, 1 September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. McGlade, *Daddy, Where are You?*; Winfield, Pamela. 1992. *Bye Bye Baby: the story of the children the GIs left behind* London: Bloomsbury. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. www.gitrace.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. McGlade, *Daddy, Where are You?*: 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Interview with James, 19 April, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See https://familysearch/org. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Interview with Dave G, 23 June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Interview with Lloyd, 28 June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Interview with Monica, 1 Sept 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Interview with Carole T. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Interview with Carole T, 9 Sept 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Telephone interview with Elaine, 28 Feb 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Email from Elaine, 23 Oct 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Telephone interview with Sandi 21 Feb 2015, interview 29 April 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Telephone interview with Elaine, 28 Feb 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Interview with Monica, 1 Sept 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. White, Walter. 1945. *A Rising Wind.* New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company: 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Pittsburgh Courier,* 14 February 1942. *Pittsburgh Courier* was one of the largest black newspapers, with a circulation of over 200,000. Wynn, *The African American Experience*: 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Smith, *When Jim Crow met John Bull*: 138-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Wynn *The African American Experience*: xiii [↑](#footnote-ref-69)