

## [Rudolph Dunbar]

[??????]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview [10?]

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ellis Williams

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Avenue, N.Y.C.

DATE November 29, 1938

SUBJECT THE STORY OF RUDOLPH DUNBAR (Social-Ethnic Studies)

1. Date and time of interview November 28, 1938
2. Place of interview Wadleigh Court - 1884 Seventh Avenue Apt. 44
3. Name and address of informant  
Rudolph Dunbar 1884 Seventh Avenue New York City
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.  
May Kirk 208 West 151st Street New York City
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of rooms house, surroundings, etc. One of the most desirable dwelling houses for workers in Harlem whose incomes are in the higher brackets. Quite an exclusive building with much pomp and service. Uniformed elevator operators, doormen and porters all contribute to keep building exterior immaculately clean. Apartment was extravagantly furnished in studio fashion that would surprise many a downtown visitor. Any number of paintings and etchings adorned the walls, while a baby grand reposed a corner of the living room in which much bric-a-brac were displayed.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ellis Williams

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Avenue

DATE November 29, 1938

SUBJECT THE STORY OF RUDOLPH DUNBAR

1. Ancestry

2. Place and date of birth British Guiana, South America, 1907.

3. Family

Brother, Barrington Dunbar reading for his Doctorate at Columbia University.

4. Places lived in, with dates

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British Guiana, New York, Paris, Germany, Austria, Rome, Vienna, Scandinavia, Switzerland and London all in order named.

5. Education, with dates

Institute of Musical Arts, Paris University and Cambridge

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Composer, conductor, author, lecturer, journalist and concert clarinetist.

7. Special skills and interests Painting

8. Community and religious activities

Harlem Art Center, Amsterdam News, The Crisis and Methodist Episcopal Church.

9. Description of informant Picture tells the story.

10. Other Points gained in interview

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ellis Williams

ADDRESS 852 St. Nicholas Avenue, N.Y.C.

DATE November 29, 1938

SUBJECT THE STORY OF RUDOLPH DUNBAR

Poverty and hardship are the best incentive for a young man's success. Consequently, the man who knows what he wants and concentrates all his energies in aiming at it will undoubtedly reach his goal. Such has been my life, where I have towered like an impregnable rock in hardship, reeling and swaying in the turbulent storms of defeat and despair with concentration of purpose to achieve my end. Adversity and disappointment, by trying me high, have added a new range and depth to the exquisiteness of my art.

My childhood days were spent in a humble modest home which formed the embodiment of religion and propriety. My parents were amazingly decent and decorous. My father wanted me to be a barrister, but I loved, and wanted to be a great musician. In view of this fact, I found it rather difficult to comply with my father's request. When I had finished my primary education, and time arrived for a settlement of my future career, my uncle, who was a "mason boss" stepped in and suggested that I should be apprenticed to him in order that I should learn the masonry trade. This, however, enraged me, and I exclaimed "What!... Do you think I want to be a mason? Stooping down to bricks and cement all my life?" This was not agreed upon and my mother, who also loved music, decided that I should have [???

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The Band at the Military Academy stimulated and aroused my artistic aspirations to a great extent, so much that I frequently prevailed upon my mother to take the necessary steps for me to enter the Military Academy. Whenever the band was en route march and passed by our house a child became delirious with enthusiasm.

My early music training began on the piano with the organist of the church which I attended. I was singing in the choir, which also acted as an early artistic stimulus. In the course of one of my piano lessons, quite unexpectedly, a lady turned to my teacher and said — "Pay heed to this youngster - look at his head; he will make a great musician some day." With my boyish stupidity, I thought that woman truly mad for making such a

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statement, notwithstanding that years after, the woman's vision had come true. As a boy I possessed an instinctive, uncanny personality for which I could not account. In the first place I was intensely shy, which automatically caused me to generate a frigid aloofness from everyone. As a result of this I was misunderstood by everyone, even by my own mother. My mother was so perturbed about this unaccountable sophistry at such an early age as I was then, that she thereupon stopped my music studies. She figured that, if I could be such a snob in the state of adolescence, I should not remember the hands that shaped my destiny. This premature and rude interruption of my music studies by my mother caused me sufferings and grief, and I wept bitterly.

Music was strong within me and I pleaded with my mother to make the necessary applications for me to enter the Military Academy in order that I might continue my musical career. My mother after noticing the kind of stimulus music had for me, decided that she would grant my request. The necessary formalities were seen to and before long I was admitted to the Academy on probation.

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It is a matter of special interest and much importance that I exonerate myself before proceeding to tell you of the Negro in London least I be misjudged. I can truthfully state that I am not aiming at the subject of arrogant or vulgar jibes at any particular race or individual which might tend to create disquieting reactions. I am merely pointing out some existing facts of the unsurmountable barrier that the Negro has to face in England. Moreover I want it be made clear that my philosophy is that the destiny of mankind should be based on happiness, therefore I would not contrive to create unpleasantness among anyone.

The revolting ignorance which exists among the masses in England concerning the character of the Negro is something most unbelievable. I am bewildered with pious horror to think that in England, where civilization and culture are supposed to be integral ingredients of an Englishman's make-up, one should find opposing and antagonistic

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indifferences lurking around. It would seem fantastic to inform you, ole chap, that in London, the greatest capital of the world, you can find every conceivable race; there are thousands and thousands of English people who are under the illusion that every black person comes from Africa. What a sad misconception. Haven't these people read books to discover that a great multitude of Negroes come from the West Indies, the United States of America, and Brazil, who have never seen Africa but on the map. What is the use of the public libraries? They are certain types of Englishmen who are obsessed with a curious and futile impulse to approach a black man, whether on the street, in the subway or in a public place, in order to ascertain where /he (?) comes from. Some of them generally put the question to you and answer it themselves; for example, they would say, "Where do you come from? Africa?" Others would say, "What part of Africa do you come from?" Others would say, "What part of Africa do you come from?" If the answer is, "I am not from Africa," and the questioner happens to be of the impudent ignorant type who has inhabited the obscure regions of Africa, where the black man goes through bitter abject misery, he would reach the point of tumult in a constrained sense of antagonism to know that a black man is free like himself to promenade the streets of London. He would then forcibly insist on his black brother to admit that he comes from Africa. On the contrary, I have encountered a good many English people who possess sympathy as wide as the world and their employment active benevolence they have approached me on the same subject of "Where do you come from[?],?" but not with the intention of humiliating me or causing unpleasantness of any kind, but simply to greet me with that warm and glowing welcome, knowing that I belong to one of the outstretched wings of the Empire.

On the street during rush hour, it is obvious that people would walk into each other accidentally. Invariably this happens to me, and if it is my fault, I would quickly apologise and politely express my regret. Sometimes in response to my apologies, my antagonistic opponent would turn to me and say, "You damn nigger, why don't you go back to Africa?" How uncomfortable is such apprehension of impudent ignorance, pitiful and pathetic in every respect. It frets my soul to see such coarseness of fibre in an Englishman. I

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have often heard this phrase recurring like a decimal number: "Why don't you go back to Africa?"; a statement of this nature is absurdly distorted because it is not in accordance with the facts which exist in Africa concerning the black man and his country. What does Africa mean to me? Nothing whatsoever. The white man with his crescendo of power, dominates almost every part of Africa with the whip, and from the sweat and blood of the black man the ordinary third-rate white man lives in an exalted position in Africa which is supposed to belong to me, much better than would be possible in his own country. This existing state of affairs contains a most perplexing problem which makes life a meaningless mockery. Nevertheless, destiny in her intricate weavings would bring someone to answer for all this.

Life has its strange injustices and so is prejudice. The various forms of prejudice which are being practised in England from the highest blue blood aristocrat to the lowest shop girl, is of enthralling interest and would therefore furnish the student of psychology with a reservoir of material. A black man is looked upon as an alien in England despite the fact that he hails from one of the British colonies. This is only too well manifested when he goes to find employment. Thus it will be seen that the black man has to fight alien as well as color prejudice in England. The most arduous task in England is for a black man of unskilled labour to secure a job, yet in Africa and the West Indies Englishmen occupy the most exalted positions. During the World War a large number of colored men were engaged to work in the sugar refineries, and after the war was over work became scarce, which led to a violent protest against these Negroes occupying jobs while Englishmen were out of work. What happened finally finally was that the colored men were given the sack in order to make room for the Englishmen. In Africa and the West Indies Englishmen are not ousted from their positions to make room for the unemployed natives, despite the fact that in many cases Englishmen are [?] quite incompetent to fill their respective positions. An Englishman can go practically anywhere here. He seldom has to win his way. The way is open for him providing he does not make obvious mistakes; he is assured of a welcome and true hospitality such as any person could wish.

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The task of a colored man selecting a lodging room in the West End of London is not easy to accomplish. In several houses where there are "Rooms to Let" signs, if a black man should apply for a room, the landlady with discriminating nicety would say, "I am sorry but the room I had vacant has just been let." Others would say, "I am awfully sorry but I do not rent rooms to colored people."

I have discovered that in order to be given consideration in renting a room the colored man must put on evening dress and be immaculate in his appearance. This only goes to show that a great majority of these people who keep lodging houses are wallowing in the unfathomable depths of ignorance.

When I was touring the provinces with Lew Leslie's "Black Birds," of which Florence Mills was the star I met with a most peculiar incident regarding this lodging affair. The company engaged a man who travelled in advance to book rooms for us, and in one particular instance in Leeds, where he sought to book a room for me, the landlady objected most violently. She said that she could not think of letting rooms to "blackies." After a considerable amount of pleading on the part of our advance man, the woman consented reluctantly and within the first two days of my residence she quickly noticed that my mannerisms, tact and smartness were far superior to those of herself and family. As a matter of fact, I had a whole lot to teach them in the line of culture. She afterwards developed an inferiority complex and about the third day she came and asked me to forgive her for the ignorance which she displayed. Before the week was out I became so much attached to the family that I ended up addressing them as "father" and "mother," and they in turn addressed me as their "son." I have experienced so many cases of this nature.

".....forgive them for they know not." Indeed this must be said concerning thousands of English people because they form notions of prejudice against the black man for no just cause, simply because they don't know. The explanation is that the educational system or propaganda is wrong. Some measure of England's colonization is also wrong. The missionaries, by singling out the exceptions rather than the average, have given the

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world a warped view of the African Negro. Some months ago, Colonel E. A. Loftus, the Headmaster of Barking Abbey School, wrote a magnificent article in the "Daily Express" entitled "Week-end Thinking for Parents: What Children Need to Know." It is a great pity that the learned Colones did not include the subject of Anthropology in his skillfully designed article. Such a subject is badly needed for parents and children. A few years ago a child saw a gentlemen of colour on the street and immediately took fright. In her haste to escape this man she ran into a motor van and was killed. Now then, what can you say about such an incident happening in a civilized country as England. Some parents teach their children to grow up in fear of a Negro by telling that if they misbehave, a black man would come and carry them away. I must repeat; therefore that the educational system is all wrong.

Some people put themselves to great discomfort rather than sit in the same compartment of a train or public conveyance with a Negro, and to be sure it is very surprising that some of these same people occupy objectionable lodgings where the lowest forms of debauchery exists, but still they have the audacity to resent the presence of a man of colour. In my profession, I am thrown in contact with all sorts and conditions of peoples consequently I am singled out in the street much easier than the average coloured person. If I should happen to meet an English girl in the street, which happens invariably, who has some affiliation with my work, naturally the correct thing to do is to pay respectful homage. This however, would create obstruction of traffic for people would be gazing impolitely and walking into other people trying to find out what you are talking about. Often times you would hear some sinister undertone from a passerby such as - "there is a blackie talking to a white girl. "

Some of my best friends are to be found among the Jews of both sexes in England. They are an oppressed race just as we are, although I should think they are better off on [account of their gold?]. We all know they are a very religious race and in view of this fact I am utterly amazed, and it completely surpasses my comprehension to find that a great majority of Jews in England carry out an astute prejudice against the Negro. Other

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than the question of a Gentile I am sure that no form of prejudice is being taught in the Synagogues. Then where do their religious teachings come in, or how does the subject of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” function. Is that in theory they accept the principles of God and in practice they do not operate it? ?

I was booked to play for a very smart wedding at Gosvenor House but was finally barred from playing on the grounds that South African Jews were attending the party and would certainly not allow a Negro orchestra to play for them.

Last summer a Jewish friend of mine who is very fond of 9 music organized a group of his friends to visit the promenade concerts at the Queen's Hall. He paid me the honour of asking me to lead the group and instruct them on the “Formation of the Symphony”, etc, etc. The group consisted of five young women and two men. One night, after the performance I offered to escort one of the young women who lived in close proximity of my residence. She gladly accepted and when we arrived at her home I bade her bon nuit and we parted. The next day the young woman in question was severely reprimanded by some members of the group. They claimed that it was obscene for a Jewish girl to walk in the streets with a black man, and that people would attribute no other motive than immorality. It was the most absurd statement to which I have ever listened. They valued my knowledge within the precincts of Queen's Hall, but out on the street my dark skin was an offence to chastity.

There are a great multitude of English people who put the black man in the category of a savage, forgetting that there are more savages among themselves than among the Negro. Look at the dreadful murder crimes and attacks on young girls in England. Can this be ever attributed to the black man? No.

A considerable amount of the green = eyed = moster prejudice is to be found among the members of the feminine sex of the lower middle class girl who is aspiring to climb the social ladder. Their modus operandi is to get into the society of an Oxford or Cambridge

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undergraduate, or some person of distinction. I have attended social functions where these girls were assembled in large groups and despite the fact that I was introduced correctly, certain cliques of them would enact a frigid aloofness towards me on the grounds solely of my color. But as soon as they learned of my accomplishments, they immediately dropped their frigidity and sought my freindship.

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Some would adopt the cult of snobbery which is unbecoming to them, thus making themselves perfectly ridiculous. The frequent appearance of such calamities furnished me with the necessary device with which to cope with the situation. The trouble with these girls is that they have no social prestige and by association with a black man they think that the social ladder would be difficult to climb. The aristocratic and upper middle class girls are entirely different. They either appreciate the virtue of the Negro or dislike him intensely. Those who appreciate his virtue are [semper eadem?] whether in their palaces or in the street.

It might interest you to know that most of the Negroes residing in England are musicians and in order to live, they have to excel. In other words to succeed a coloured musician has to go his white brother one better. ?

Life is really an incredibly mysterious and apparently unjust succession of incidents for the Negro. While there are a great majority of Jewish people who are obsessed with the idea of adherence to their antagonistic allegiance, there are also a large number who fraternize with the coloured people. Some Jewish people think that a full blooded Negro possesses some kind of secret esoteric significance and that by touching him luck will come to them. One day, while on my way to my studio I happened to be passing through a Jewish neighborhood when an elderly lady approached me and said "May I touch you for luck?" I was so utterly surprised at the suddenness of this gesture that I became speechless for a moment. However when I recovered I turned to the lady and said "If by touching me you will derive any material benefit I will permit you to so do." A clever young Jewish girl

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who was near overheard the conversation and was thrilled 11 to the utmost followed me secretly to my studio and ascertained from the attendant my name and occupation. A few days later, to my great surprise I was astonished to find an article entitled "Touch Me For Luck" sent by the girl in the post. This is not the only incident to which I can refer of a similar nature. However thanks to the Jewish people who think that my race possesses such a mystical influence.

As time moves on the Negro in England continues to climb the tortuous slopes of progress. Wherever he goes he is always under surveillance, directly or indirectly. In view of this fact a Negro has to be meticulously careful in his deportment. If in a public place he misbehaves and is ejected, no other colored person would be permitted to enter because all other Negroes would be judged by the miscreant. The fact that he succeeds magnificently proves that he has made his mark and has reached a high level of accomplishment, an obvious indication of greater things to come when artificial handicaps are removed. Let us then look upon this colour problem in a more enlightened way, the Jews especially, who are an oppressed minority. Give credit where it is due, and to the Negro give that measure of freedom and opportunity which you ask for yourselves.