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N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014

Interview N-0031

Elondust Patrick Johnson

26 February 2014

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ABSTRACT – E. PATRICK JOHNSON

Professor E. Patrick Johnson describes his childhood in Hickory, North Carolina and student life at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill from 1989-1991, focusing on early performance experience, activism with the Black Student Movement, sexuality, and oral history. Johnson reflects extensively on his mother and grandmother, both domestic and factory workers as well as excellent cooks. He describes geographic segregation in Hickory, growing up in public housing, and his integrated classroom (1973). He began performing at church and the Ridgeview Community Center as young as five years old. At UNC, he directed the Black Student Movement Gospel Choir, which included many gay men, though Johnson did not come out until he moved to Baton Rouge to complete a PhD in Performance Studies (1996). He protested with the Black Student Movement to establish a free-standing black cultural center and demand the university divest from apartheid South Africa. He remembers the influence of Professor Sonja Haynes and lobbying for more African American Studies courses. Professor Della Pollock taught him oral history performance and their class wrote and toured a performance of Jacquelyn Hall and Jim Leloudis' Like a Family. Johnson reflects on his oral history dissertation on his grandmother, the gendered differences of collecting oral histories from lesbians for his book Honey Pot, and perceptions and attitudes of of queerness during his childhood and church in Hickory, NC.

FIELD NOTES—E. PATRICK JOHNSON
(compiled February 27, 2014)

Interviewee: E. Patrick Johnson
Interviewer: Coco Wilder
Interview Date: February 26, 2014
Location: The Love House, Chapel Hill, NC.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEWEE

E. Patrick Johnson is the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University. Born March 1, 1967, Johnson grew up in the Black neighborhood of Hickory, North Carolina. He performed in church plays and choirs, and community and school productions. He earned a BA and MA in Speech Communications at University of North Carolina –Chapel Hill in 1989 and 1991 respectively. He was president of the UNC Black Student Movement Gospel Choir and participated in Black Student Movement activist campaigns against apartheid and for an freestanding Black cultural center and additional African American Studies courses. He became interested in oral history after taking a performance course with Professor Della Pollock and adapting Jacquelyn Hall and Jim Leloudis' *Like A Family* into a play. He earned his PhD in Performance Studies at Louisiana State University in 1996, during which he came out as a gay man. Johnson produces performance pieces and plays based on oral history interviews he has collected. Johnson's notable work include: the oral history book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), and its companion *Sweet Tea—The Play*; and the forthcoming oral history *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* and its companion performance piece *Gathering Honey—Stories of Black Southern Women Who Love Women*.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEWER

Coco Wilder is an undergraduate at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is conducted this project as part of the Southern Oral History Program internship program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW

The interview took place in the Love House parlor, which has a glass door so the recorder picked up exterior sounds of people leaving a meeting. It lasted just over an hour.

NOTES ON RECORDING

The primary recording device failed, so the archived recording is the interviewer's back up, an iPhone 4.

TAPE LOG – E. PATRICK JOHNSON

Interviewee: E. Patrick Johnson

Interviewer: Coco Wilder

Interview Date: February 26, 2014

Location: Parlor, The Love House, Chapel Hill

TAPE INDEX

<u>TIME</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
0:01	Introduction
0:36	Childhood: large single-parent family; geographic segregation in Hickory, North Carolina.
2:44	Family: mother's domestic work at "Olson's, a rich white family on the North Side of the tracks"; move to public housing at age eight.
4:29	"Childhood full of joy": mother put him in talent shows and his stage fright; not realizing own poverty; closeness of neighborhood community; love of playing outside, "we picked blueberries and put them in top of a mason jar lid and let them sit and the sun and turn them over, and those would be our pies."
8:49	Schooling: "I was a smart child, I really liked school;" perfect attendance; recognizing his poverty while at wealthy high school ; close relationship with mother revolving around stories and cooking.
10:35	Early performance experience: singing soprano in church children's choir; talent shows at Ridgeview Community Center.
12:15	Early performance experience con't: first grade teacher in early integrated

classroom [1973] becoming his “patron”; regret of quitting piano; age seven and being only black child and performing lead role in Carr Lutheran Church’s play BBQ for Ben; listing of past roles and auditions; Johnson sings song from BBQ for Ben.

- 16:45 Application to UNC-Chapel Hill: “I didn’t apply to any other school”; musing that no one in his family went to UNC; receiving scholarship from Hickory Junior League.
- 18:25 Housing: Living in Hinton James Dorm; move to Carrboro as upperclassman.
- 18:47 Campus involvement: singing in Black Student Movement Gospel Choir [UNC Gospel Choir]; protesting with BSM to get free standing Black cultural center, he “never thought that would happen”; constantly writing and directing original shows like “Never A Dull Moment” based on own poetry; adaptation of James Baldwin for stage, Black Diaspora Love performance of Black love poems.
- 20:34 Oral History: impact of Della Pollock’s class, adapting *Like a Family* into touring performance; writing master’s on grandmother’s oral history.
- 21:47 Black Student Movement Gospel Choir: “One of my best friends who came to Carolina directed the choir, so the choir came to my church when I was still in high school”; becoming president and director of choir, “family” of “church kids; traveling to choir competitions like McDonald’s Gospel Fest; life-long friendships formed in choir.
- 26:18 Poetry: “I wrote one poem called Black Christmas: no lights/ no gifts/ just another black Christmas”; influence of “militant” Black arts movement; writing suicide poems and later realizing “I was struggling with being gay”; writing self, family, social commentary.
- 28:25 Sexuality: “When I was here at UNC, there was no coming out process;” friendships with openly gay men; living with girlfriend; coming out after moving to Baton Rouge and experiences with racism there; feelings of depression and suicide.
- 31:09 Friendships and race: community of gay men in choir; knowing “a couple of white gay people”; asserting heterosexuality while maintaining strong friendships with gay men—“everyone knew I was also gay except me”; cooking for people in

Hinton James.

- 32: 50 No association with Carolina Gay Association: it was “stigmatized when I was on campus”; taboo of blue jeans as identifier of homosexuality on National Coming Out Day; white freshman year roommate later coming out.
- 34:03 Black Student Movement Activism: protesting lack of independent space for Black Cultural Center and marginalization of Black students; frustration that North Carolina State had center but not UNC.
- 36:00 Death of Professor Sonja Haynes: protests increasing after he left; Professor Haynes’ death “really pushed [things] over the edge.”
- 37:00 Anti-Apartheid campaigns: protesting with BSM for university divestment; constructing shanties in the pit; lobbying for more African American Studies courses.
- 38:26 Leadership roles: regular participant in protests; president of choir and meetings with leadership of BSM branch organizations.
- 39:59 Beginning oral history project on grandmother: getting his masters, “didn’t know oral history could be considered scholarship;” scratching original plan for “convoluted” Richard Wright adaptation; mentor’s suggestion to write about grandmother.
- 41:30 Grandmother’s Oral History: Spending summer with grandmother in her King’s Mountain retirement center; hearing stories about neighbors and grandmother’s speculation that neighbor was gay because he baked pies.
- 42:50 Dissertation at LSU: interviewing grandmother about life as live-in domestic; experience of interviewing her white employer with grandmother in room; difficulty of hearing white employer call her a “mammy”; grandmother lying about why she left that employer; Johnson discovering true story—“she didn’t want to be put on display” at employer’s family wedding; Johnson’s struggle with grandmother and employer’s relationship; producing play “Never a Cross Word” from these oral histories.
- 47:47 Grandmother con’t: her support of schooling, spending time with him; grandmother getting on airplane for the first time to attend LSU graduation.

- 49:00 Mother's labor: limited memories of going to work with mother, a domestic worker for a wealthy white family, including trauma of witnessing employer's cat scratch mother; her work in Hickory Springs factory.
- 51:07 Food, community and family: Mother wouldn't "eat everybody's chitlins"; community recognition of his mother's baking skill.
- 55:05 *Honey Pot*: gendered differences between experience of gay men and women; hearing repeated stories of sexual violence against women; fluidity of women's sexuality compared to men's; reluctance of women to open up about abortion to a woman interviewer.
- 58:59 Childhood bullying: "I wore a size called husky"; imitating teachers as class clown; recognition of other effeminate boys.
- 1:01:28 Church: emphasizes lack of homophobia; speculation about sexuality of preacher's son.
- 1:01:56 Gay Hickory: awareness of "effeminate" "flamboyant men" but did not perceive intense harassment; no knowledge of men living together.
- 1:03:19 Lesbians and Bisexual Women in Hickory: Uncle Tommy, a "dirty old man," sleeping with Sylvia who was suspected of being "half and half."
- 1:05:50 Conclusion.