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N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014

Interview N-0032

Randall Garrett Kenan

20 February 2014

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ABSTRACT – RANDALL KENAN

Randall Kenan grew up in Chinquapin, North Carolina in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to teaching college English, he has written numerous works of fiction and non-fiction on race, sexuality, and the South. Kenan says that he felt disillusioned with small town life in Chinquapin and notes the invisibility of homosexuality there. As an undergraduate at UNC, he participated in the Black Student Movement, largely because of UNC's small minority of black students. He describes a dearth of gay activism, few openly gay black students, and little knowledge of past gay and racial activism on campus. Kenan deeply contemplates the difficulties of being both black and gay in the 1980s and describes the concern and knowledge of HIV as non-existent until the late 1980s. While at UNC, Kenan lived for a year in "Friendly Castle," and he describes the off-campus gay community as centered on gay bars in Durham and gay bookstores in Chapel Hill and Carrboro. He characterizes the gay community on campus as segregated by gender and race and describes the attitude of UNC's administration towards gay issues as lethargic. Stressing the clash of homosexuality with the hypermasculine attitude of many black men, he theorizes on the reception of gay men in the African American community. He devotes some discussion to religion, considering himself an "apostate." Kenan also describes living in England and New York City after college as liberating experiences that motivated him to write about the South. He highlights the diversity of his background and identities as rich material for his writing. He also compares UNC and Chapel Hill to other places around the state and the country, stating that the modern gay community in Chapel Hill has entered the mainstream. Kenan discusses his own oral history work and the influence of James Baldwin on his career and concludes by deliberating on the most pressing problems facing the black and gay communities today. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's intern project focusing on gay activism and life at UNC in the 1970s and 1980s.

FIELD NOTES – RANDALL KENAN
(compiled February 21, 2014)

Interviewee: Randall Kenan
Interviewer: Turner Henderson
Interview Date: February 20, 2014
Location: Greenlaw Building
UNC-Chapel Hill

THE INTERVIEWEE. Randall Kenan was born in Brooklyn, New York, but grew up in Chinquapin, North Carolina. He received his Bachelors of Arts in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After working at Alfred Knopf Publishing in New York City for five years, he became a full-time writer and professor of English. His works include *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989); *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* (1992); *James Baldwin: Author* (1994); *A Time Not Here* (with Norman Mauskoﬀ) (1997); *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (1999); and *The Fire This Time* (2007). He has also received various accolades and recognitions, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and election to the Fellowship of Southern Writers. He now teaches in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, simultaneously working on two new books, “There’s a Man Going Around Taking Names” and “If I Had Two Wings: Stories”.

THE INTERVIEWER. Turner Henderson is currently a senior undergraduate in the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is an intern with the Southern Oral History Program for the Spring 2014 semester.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in Professor Kenan’s office in Greenlaw Hall on UNC-Chapel Hill’s campus. There were no interruptions, although several times a phone notification went off and the office computer dinged. Occasionally voices from the hall outside of the office can be heard. Everything besides disclaimers and introductory and post-interview conversation was recorded, with the interview lasting an hour and twenty-five minutes. Generally, Kenan was more than willing to discuss personal issues from his past, and he rarely shied away from any topics. The interview broadly focused on his experiences and difficulties as a gay African American man at UNC and in the South. A large part of the discussion focuses on his social life and involvements on campus at UNC, with his own personal analysis of being African American and gay. A significant part of the interview also explores the way in which his race, sexuality, and background has influenced his writing. The interview ends with his views on current problems facing African Americans and the wider LGBT community in the US. This

interview was conducted as part of a project investigating gay and lesbian activism under the wider umbrella of the sexual revolution at UNC in the 1970s and 1980s.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP Zoom #3 Recorder and adjusted the volume slightly during the beginning of the interview.

TAPE LOG – RANDALL KENAN

Interviewee: Randall Kenan

Interviewer: Turner Henderson

Interview Date: February 20, 2014

Location: Greenlaw 313, UNC-Chapel Hill

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

Time

Topic

[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]

- 0:02 Introduction: "My name is Turner Henderson and I am here with Professor Randall Kenan..."
- 0:30 Birth in 1963 in Brooklyn, NY; description of childhood in Duplin County and Chinquapin, NC. Reflection on his attitude towards growing up in a small town: "Life is elsewhere, and I wanted to get there."
- 2:42 Invisibility of homosexuality in Chinquapin.
- 3:42 Plan to go to college and an interest in science, which made him different from the rest of this community.
- 5:43 Introduction to campus life and activism at UNC in early 1980s; small number of black students. Living on predominately white North Campus. Involvement in Black Student Movement; nascent gay activism.
- 8:25 Details on the Carolina Gay Association at UNC while he was a student; it served mainly a social function and did not seem to attract many members. Radical nature of simply speaking out about homosexuality during conservative era of 1980s. Lack of black men who were openly gay.
- 11:13 Description of African American gay community on campus; most gay black men he knew through the Black Student Movement Choir.
- 13:00 Campus and administration's treatment of homosexuality; coming out as a big deal. Discussion of his own process of coming out and the influence of *The Color Purple* and religion on that; fully came out after college.

- 16:00 Description of the Black Student Movement's focus on gaining recognition and cultural space for black students.
- 17:50 Discussion of the student publication *The Phoenix*, for which he was an editor.
- 19:43 Talks about the lack of institutional memory for gay and racial activism that had occurred on campus before his time.
- 21:00 Reflects on difficulties of being both African American and gay during his time at UNC; had to make a choice between the two identities. Provides an anecdote about a visit to campus by James Baldwin. Discusses how it was usually more comfortable for black gay men to choose to be part of the black community over the gay community.
- 25:19 Speaks on attitudes about AIDS in Chapel Hill and New York City and the lack of knowledge and concern at first. Also talks about the "gay press" and gay bookstores in New York City.
- 28:10 Considers time living in the "Castle" on Friendly Lane, a gay male residence; describes it as "an open secret". Also recounts the large parties that they would have at the Castle, which served as an important location for the gay social scene. Refers to the gender segregation of the gay community at the time.
- 31:55 Outlines the lack of a formal gay social scene in Chapel Hill, and their often going to Durham gay bars.
- 34:07 Details the way in which he had two distinct groups of friends: black gay friend and white gay friends. No overt racism within white gay circle of friends. Tells a story about being wrongly suspected by a police office for breaking into a sorority house. Also touches on examples of racism he experienced at fraternity mixers on campus.
- 39:41 Discusses his views on the complicated reception of homosexuality within the black community. Talks about the role of organized religion and of the embrace of "hypermasculinity" by African American males in this reception.
- 43:43 Delves into his own religious views and how religion relates to his sexuality; he is attracted to the theory and superstition of Christianity, but disagrees with it on an intellectual level. Considers himself an "apostate".
- 46:20 Compares the Physics department and the English department at UNC. Describes relationships with different English professors, including Lee Green and Max Steele.

- 49:58 Describes gay community in Chapel Hill outside of the student body. Equates gay people who were out as usually being politically active. Discusses the Internationalist and Communist bookstores, as well as Carrboro, which were common meeting places for gay men.
- 54:39 Portrays much of the administration of UNC as displaying a degree of inertia to change; briefly describes Bill Friday's role.
- 56:55 Chronicles his time studying at Oxford in England and how his race was positively received there. Notes no involvement with a gay community there. Points to the experience as reinforcing his desire to write about the American South.
- 60:23 Discusses his work in publishing in New York City after college and the important influences it had on him. Briefly mentions the writing of his first novel *A Visitation of Spirits* while in New York.
- 62:15 Analyzes the rich tapestry of experiences and identities he has to explore within his writing; provides insight into the way in which his race, sexuality, and background impact his perspective.
- 64:05 Compares UNC to other universities at which he has taught. Theorizes that there is "an I-40 phenomenon" in North Carolina, with most cities along the interstate being more accepting of homosexuality.
- 70:50 Compares UNC in the 1980s to UNC in 2014, noting that student activism is much more of a norm than it used to be; also points to the increased percentage of black students at UNC. Describes the difference in Chapel Hill's gay community as having "gone over the rainbow", i.e. into the mainstream. According to Kenan, this has resulted in the disappearance of a distinct gay community.
- 75:31 Describes his own experiences with oral history while writing *Walking on Water*, particularly how it allowed him to consolidate disparate histories. Reveals his motivation for the project as being to investigate "blackness", but also thinks of race as being an outdated concept. Also comments on his plans to conduct more oral history in his work on black cowboys.
- 80:11 Reflects on the influence of James Baldwin on his writing career; he initially fled from the shadow of Baldwin, but eventually embraced his influence.
- 82:50 Deliberates on most pressing problems facing African American and gay communities in the US.