Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616
info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Johnson, Robert

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson,

Dates: April 7, 2006

Bulk Dates: 2006

Physical Description: 6 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:38:37).

Abstract: Africana studies professor, lawyer, and playwright Robert Johnson (1948 - ) has written several books and plays documenting the experience of the African diaspora as well as advocating for social change for African Americans. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 7, 2006, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2006_068

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Africana studies professor, lawyer and playwright Robert C. Johnson was born in Summit, Tennessee near Chattanooga on May 13, 1948 and moved with his family to Boston, Massachusetts at age thirteen. After struggling in Boston public schools, he transferred to the prestigious private school, the Commonwealth School. There he excelled under the mentorship of Charles E. Merrill, Jr., the founder and headmaster. At Commonwealth, Johnson participated in extracurricular activities and began writing plays. He received a B.A. degree in political studies from Bowdoin College in 1971 and a Watson Fellowship to write plays and study African American immigrants in East Africa. Johnson earned a M.A. degree in Africana Studies in 1975 and his J.D. degree in 1977, both from Cornell University. As a law student, he worked on the defense team for prisoners implicated in the Attica Prison riots and he later, developed an educational program at Auburn Prison in Auburn, New York.

From 1977 to 1978, Johnson worked as an affirmative action officer for the Massachusetts Board of Community Colleges and the University of Massachusetts at Boston. He left affirmative action work to practice employment and criminal law with his law partner, Eddie Jenkins, Jr. After a heart attack in 1992, Johnson stepped back from his law practice and became an Africana Studies professor at University of Massachusetts at Boston. Johnson has published extensively in the field of African American history. Most notable among his books are "Why Blacks Left America for Africa: Interviews with Black Expatriates, 1971-1999" and "Nantucket's People of Color: Essays on History, Politics, and Community." As a playwright Johnson has documented the African American experience with dramas such as "Scag," "Stop and Frisk" and "Mama G."

Johnson has been involved with many community projects and philanthropic organizations including the “The African Diaspora Program” an after school development program for African American youth in Boston and the
United South End Settlements' Harriet Tubman House. Johnson has been married to Amy Merrill, the daughter of his mentor Charles E. Merrill, Jr., for over ten years. He has two children, Gary Weldon and Amika Ama.

Robert C. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on April 7, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Johnson was conducted by Robert Hayden on April 7, 2006, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 6 Betacam SP videocassettes. Africana studies professor, lawyer, and playwright Robert Johnson (1948 - ) has written several books and plays documenting the experience of the African diaspora as well as advocating for social change for African Americans.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Johnson, Robert, Jr., J.D.

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghela, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Robert, Jr., J.D.--Interviews
Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Johnson

African American educators--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

African American dramatists--Massachusetts--Boston--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

LawMakers

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 8/15/2011 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.
Robert Cecil Johnson, Jr., slates the interview. He was born on May 13, 1948 in Summit, Tennessee to Louise Burgan and Robert C. Johnson, Sr. Robert, Sr. died when Johnson was very young. Louise left Tennessee to find work in Boston, Massachusetts and Johnson lived with his maternal grandparents, Hannah and Reverend Nathan Burgan. Johnson recalls that his grandmother ordered him to hide in the woods if he heard the Ku Klux Klan coming. When he was thirteen, Louise sent for Johnson and his sisters, Olivia and Cynthia. Johnson describes his father's family. His paternal family, the Johnsons, were from Ooletewah, Tennessee and founded the town's church. His paternal grandparents were John and Icie Johnson. Johnson then talks about religion and his family. While his maternal grandfather was a pastor and his mother was one of the founders of the Holy Tabernacle Church in Massachusetts, Johnson shares that he has never been religious.

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. discusses his education in Tennessee and Boston, Massachusetts. Johnson went to Summit Elementary School which was the black school but as a student he was not aware of the segregation. When he moved to Boston and attended Dwight Elementary School, he had white classmates and teachers for the first time. Johnson's earliest memory is of his father's death and the smell of chit'lin's cooking. Johnson recalls that after Dwight Elementary School, he attended Charles E. Mackey Middle School and The English High School. After school, he went to South End House, a youth center run by Mel King, a community organizer. Due to racist and discriminatory teachers, Johnson's grades were poor. Therefore, King enrolled Johnson in A Better Chance program which sent students to a summer session at Dartmouth College and then on to a private high school. Johnson attended the Commonwealth School and improved his grades in order to gain acceptance to college.

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African Americans families--Tennessee.
African American grandparents--Tennessee.
African Americans--Migration--United States--20th century.
African American--Families--Massachusetts--Boston.
African Americans--Religion--United States.
Ku Klux Klan (1915--)--Tennessee.
African Americans--Churches--Massachusetts--Boston.

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African American students--Education (Primary)--Tennessee.
African American students--Education (Elementary)--Massachusetts--Boston.
African American students--Education (Secondary)--Massachusetts--Bostons.
Discrimination in education--Massachusetts--Boston.
Commonwealth School (Boston, Mass.)--Students.
Merrill, Charles, 1920-.
King, Mel.
South End House (Boston, Mass.).
Academic achievement--Massachusetts--Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2006_068_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00
2006/04/07

Robert C. Johnson discusses his education. In the tenth grade, through the A Better Chance program, Johnson attended Commonwealth School, a private school in Boston, Massachusetts. Johnson talks how the headmaster, Charles E. Merrill, Jr. took him under his wing. On Merrill's advice, Johnson attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine where he participated in student activism, founded the Afro-American Society, and wrote two plays, "Mama's Boy" and "Scag." After graduating from Bowdoin in 1971, he won a Watson Fellowship and traveled to Africa to interview black repatriates with his first wife, and his son Gary. Johnson then describes his time as a student at Cornell University's Law School. He worked on the defense team for Attica prisoners while they were on trial for the prison riots, started a prison education program at Auburn Prison, and provided legal counsel to Cornell students arrested for protesting the university.

African American students--Education (Secondary)--Massachusetts--Boston.
Commonwealth School (Boston, Mass.)--Students.
African American students--Education (Higher)--Maine--Brunswick.
Bowdoin College--Students--Political activity--20th century.
African American college students--Political activity--Maine--Brunswick.
Merrill, Charles, 1920--.
African American families.
American drama--African American authors.
Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Program.
Civil rights movements--United States--20th century.
African Americans--Africa, East.
Immigrants--Africa, East.
Cornell Law School--Students--Political activity--20th century.
African American law students--Political activity--New York (State)--Ithaca--20th century.
Auburn Correctional Facility.
Prison riots--New York (State)--Attica.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2006_068_001_004, TRT: 0:30:18
2006/04/07

Richard C. Johnson discusses his career as an attorney. In 1975, Johnson received his M.A. degree in Africana Studies and his J.D. degree from Cornell University two years later. He then moved back to Boston to raise his son, Gary and his daughter, Amika with his first wife, Brenda. Johnson worked at Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges and University of Massachusetts-Boston as an affirmative action officer, setting hiring practices and policies. Johnson then describes how he opened his own law practice focusing on employment and criminal law with his law partner, Eddie Jenkins. He practiced law full time until his heart attack in 1992 when he cut back to part time. Johnson then describes his involvement with philanthropic organizations including the Harriet Tubman House and the American Association for Affirmative Action. Johnson enjoys traveling and taking photographs. He wrote a play "Stop and Frisk," based on his own arrest and
Robert C. Johnson discusses his work as a professor. Johnson was hired as an assistant professor of Africana Studies at University of Massachusetts-Boston. He published eight plays and the books, "Shona" and "Why Blacks Left American for Africa: Interviews with Black Repatriates, 1971-1999" and quickly attained tenure and a full professorship. Johnson then went on sabbatical to Tennessee where he became involved with the prisoner and painter, Ndume, who was on death row. Johnson exhibited Ndume's paintings and found him an appropriate legal team. Johnson then talks about navigating the rocky terrain of his marriage to Amy Merrill, who is a white woman and the daughter of Charles E. Merrill, Jr. The couple tries to be aware of people's sensitivity to interracial couples. Johnson reflects on his life. He wrote the play, "Mama G" for his mother after her death and misses her presence. Johnson feels fulfilled but regrets the pain he caused his first wife. He hopes the African American community will take control of education of the inner-city youth. Johnson wants to be remembered as a playwright, professor and an attorney who loved his wife and family.

Robert C. Johnson narrates photographs.