

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Howard Johnson

Any night we could see, you know, governors, judges, Babs Hutton, the Donahue brothers, inheritors of the Woolworth fortune, [Arturo] Toscanini in the audience, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker. The elite of show business and the business world and politics were the audience. So we were always psyched up, when the music hit up and we hit that stage. We were there to perform. And it was in the middle of the depression, 75 percent of Black males unemployed in Harlem, and here we are, dancing in these fine clothes and making thirty-five dollars a week, . . . well, when you're unemployed, thirty-five dollars a week is like a million dollars. And most of the community was on welfare. So the people who worked at the Cotton Club were part of an elite in Harlem and were looked up to and respected because the Cotton Club was regarded as the pinnacle of show business for Blacks.

Howard Johnson, son of Howard and Gertrude McGinnis Johnson, was born on January 30, 1915. His father was a professional baseball player, redcap, and waiter; his mother was a homemaker.

Johnson grew up in Orange, New Jersey and New York City. He was a dancer at the Cotton Club in the early 1930s. From 1938 to 1956, he was a Communist Party organizer. During World War II, he served overseas with the U.S. Army's 92nd Division.

From 1957 to 1967 he was employed as a proofreader. Later, he was a project director for Fieldston School Upward Bound Program. At SUNY New Paltz he taught sociology from 1971 to 1982.

In 1986, Johnson moved to Hawai'i.

Tape No. 18-8-1-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Howard Johnson (HJ)

May 12, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: Hello, I am at the home of Howard Johnson on Hihikai Street in Honolulu. This is Kathryn Takara interviewing and we are in May [12,] 1988.

Howard, would you tell us a little bit about your life--where you were born and about your family, your mother and your father and your sisters and your brothers.

HJ: Mm hmm. Well, I was born January 30, 1915. And I find out later that I'm an Aquarian. An Aquarian's Aquarian. But I'm going to stay away from astrology.

(Laughter)

HJ: After what has happened to my fellow Aquarian, Ronald Reagan. And that's all we (share). Anyway, my father was Howard Johnson. My mother was Gertrude McGinnis, that was her maiden name. I found out only recently that my father's real name should not have been Johnson. Johnson was the name of the buddy of my grandfather, my real grandfather, whose name was George Gaither. And my father was born 1894. My grandfather, George, left my grandmother sometime shortly before 1898 and served with [Theodore] Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba. The medal that you see on the photo is a medal from that war. Someday I'll have to magnify it and find out exactly what it is. He returned and as a result of being a veteran, he got a job in Washington, D.C. in the Bureau of Engraving. And never came back to my grandmother. His buddy, Eugene Johnson, he had [been] asked to take care of his children and his old lady. They were not married. And Gene Johnson did that very well and became, in effect, the surrogate father of my father, Howard. So that's how he got the name Johnson. He had a sister Corinne and a brother whose name, interestingly enough, was neither Gaither or Johnson. My father's half-brother's name was Leon Cooke. My grandmother's name was Lethia Goode. And she was the youngest of a family of four. She had three older brothers: John Goode, George Goode, and James Goode, who ran away from home at fourteen and lived on a farm with a man who [he] had a great respect for, inspired him to go North. Named

Anderson. So he took the name James H. Anderson and he was the founder of the Amsterdam News. James H. Anderson, my great uncle . . .

KT: Can you just tell us a little bit about the Amsterdam News?

HJ: That was founded about 1905, I think. Sometime before the founding of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909]. And I gather from just a few things that I've come across that my great uncle was what would be classified today as a militant. But he was a militant who saw the expediency of operating within the system. And I'm almost certain that he was associated [with] the Niagara Movement [1905] in some way because in my research on W.E.B. DuBois, I came across a photo of him sitting there beside W.E.B. DuBois in 1913. [The Niagara Movement, organized by DuBois in 1905, is considered a forerunner of the NAACP. Source: Encyclopedia of Black America, 1981.] And he was probably sitting there in his capacity as editor, and the photo was of a group of Black males all in formal wear. Morning coats and gray stripe pants. On the occasion of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in New York City. So that was an interesting little bit of history connected with my great uncle James H. Anderson . . .

KT: And excuse me, he felt the need for a Black press and for that reason he founded the . . .

HJ: Oh, definitely. He founded the Amsterdam News, yes. I think it was the second Black newspaper in New York. The first one was New York Age. [The Amsterdam News was actually founded in 1909; the New York Age was founded in 1884. The first Black newspaper, Freedom's Journal, was founded in New York in 1827. Source: Encyclopedia of Black America.] And reading some editorials from the New York, Amsterdam News, around 1915, 1916, he was referring in editorials to the concept of a Negro nation in the United States. So contrary to a lot of the propaganda about this being a communist invention in Moscow that was imported by a Communist party, Blacks in the United States were already talking about nationhood before the Communist party was even formed, which is an interesting sidelight on this.

KT: Was [Marcus Moziah] Garvey there at the time that he was publishing . . .

HJ: Garvey came to New York shortly after Booker T. Washington died. That's a little bit of historic irony. He wanted to meet with Booker T. Washington, who died in early 1915, shortly after I was born. And they never met. Garvey came to New York, I guess, got here about August 1915, I think. And my great uncle added to his staff some members of the Garvey movement [a Black nationalistic movement with an aim to establish a free Africa] who also, interestingly enough, got involved with the Communist party, 1919, and one of them became a regular editor of the Amsterdam News while my great uncle was still the editor. His name was Cyril Briggs, who

was also one of the founders along with Harry Haywood and Otto Huiswood of the African Blood Brotherhood, which was to the left of the Garvey movement. They didn't believe in making it within the system; they were anti-capitalists. But they were also members of the Garvey movement. They were the left-wing of the Garvey movement and were the Black nationalist group within the Communist party. So (there)'s [an] interesting political linkage there.

KT: So then let's go back to your mother's side, then. Your mother . . .

HJ: On my mother's side, her father was Frank McGinnis and he was an Irishman who was the exercise boy for the great trotter who held the world mile-trotting record for many years, the horse named Dan Patch. And he was a heavy drinker and I think he got fired for his drinking and he migrated to Orange, New Jersey, after my mother was born and sometime around 1912, 1913. I haven't traced that down. His wife, my mother's mother, was Henrietta DeGroat, who came from one of the four [or] five families that are considered the primary family clusters within a group that have now been named the Ramapo Mountain people in Rockland County in Southern New York state. Rockland County is just above the New Jersey state line.

KT: What is that? Can you spell Ramapo?

HJ: R-A-M-A-P-O.

KT: That's Indian?

HJ: [Yes.] And the Ramapos are a subtribe of the Lenni Lenape tribe.

KT: Can you spell that?

HJ: L-E-N-[N]-I L-E-N-A-P-E. The Lenni Lenapean Indians were affiliated, or a subtribe of the Tuscarorans, and the Tuscarorans were one of the six tribes or nations that comprise the Iroquois confederacy. My mother's family (grew out of) consistent intermarriage and interbreeding between Blacks, who were mostly fugitive slaves, (who) came up the eastern seaboard route, Hessian soldiers who deserted from the British army and . . .

KT: Hessian meaning Haitian?

HJ: Hessian, that's [from] the principality of Hesse in Germany. H-E-S-S-E. The British used Hessian [mercenary] troops along with their regular British Redcoats. And Dutch and Indians. The Ramapo Mountain people are called a long-standing tri-racial isolate group (in anthropological circles and sociological circles). And there are many such groups scattered around different parts of [the] United States who have maintained certain traditions as deviant groups that have enabled them to develop a subculture outside of the general culture. So as a radical, I was always quite (familiar with being an outsider). My mother told me about her background (at an

early age). I always identified with being outside of the establishment, off the beaten track. My cousins and all the people that I knew were like that also. We were always on the other side of the railroad tracks . . .

KT: In everything. Kind of the observers.

HJ: Right, right. So that the later, more sophisticated radicalism that I developed was already there in embryonic form.

KT: So during that day and time there were no barriers to Blacks marrying Whites or Indians marrying Whites or . . .

HJ: Not in these areas. It was customary, and it was not always with benefit (of) establishment (custom). I would say, probably, many of the marriages or most of the marriages were common law. In fact, I'm still trying to locate a marriage certificate from my mother and father. In fact, my first birth certificate that I ever got on request from the hospital had on it "Baby McGinnis." So I picked up the Howard Johnson somewhere after that first birth certificate. I guess my father decided that he'd at least give me the blessing of the name. (Chuckles)

KT: So then your mother and your father, how did they come together?

HJ: My father was a great basketball player and . . .

KT: You inherited his height?

HJ: (No. He was shorter. My grandfather was six feet four inches.)

KT: . . . and the nickname "Stretch" [HJ's nickname] kind of . . .

HJ: Right. Yeah. I guess my mother saw him playing and was charmed by his skill on the court. He was also a professional baseball player and a crack tennis player. He was skilled at anything that required physical coordination. He was a great billiard player and pool player. He was also what they call in gambling circles, a top-flight mechanic, that's someone who can deal the cards.

KT: To his advantage?

HJ: To his advantage . . .

KT: Or anyone else's advantage . . .

HJ: Yes, yes.

KT: . . . as he sees fit.

HJ: Oh, yes. I saw him sit at a table and deal five hands to five different players. One player had a pair of tens; one, a pair of jacks; one, a pair of queens; one, a pair of kings. He would hit

himself with an ace on the fifth card. That's what his sophisticated manipulation (could) bring out. (Chuckles) In fact, back in those days, unemployment was a big factor in the Black community. And we were in the depression before it ever came to the country as a whole. And my father supplemented--there was no unemployment insurance in those days--so he supplemented the family income by hustling cards and playing baseball and at one time, he organized, he told me, the first interracial pickpocket team.

(Laughter)

HJ: And they operated out of Grand Central Station in New York, where he was also a redcap.

KT: In terms of playing these sports, were they on integrated teams at that point?

HJ: Oh, no.

KT: That's what I was . . .

HJ: No, there was no such thing as integration in baseball. That didn't take place until Jackie Robinson hit the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

KT: [Yes,] that's right.

HJ: My father was active in baseball from approximately 1914 to about 1926 or 1927. The last team he played with was the New York Lincoln Giants which later became the New York Black Yankees. They would play barnstorming teams formed after the big leagues ended their season with players like Babe Ruth and other top-flight players and whip them. So I knew at a very early age that Blacks were qualified. My father was a living example of a very qualified person. He was also brilliant, not only in athletics but intellectually and could recite Shakespeare by the yard. And he could go right through all of Julius Caesar.

KT: And yet typical of the many Black men of the period despite his brilliant mind and his education, he worked at the railroad . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . as a porter.

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: I think that we can see this up until current times . . .

HJ: Oh, certainly.

KT: . . . or at least the past twenty years, people who have great minds . . .

HJ: He told me that many of the redcaps at Grand Central were Ph.D.'s, graduates of Lincoln (or) Howard University. Could not get work in their field. That's why someone like Duke Ellington, who got a scholarship as an artist at Pratt Institute turned it down because he felt he could go farther playing music. Fletcher Henderson had a B.A. in chemistry. But where could a Black go in (the) field of chemistry? So he went into music. That's why Black music is so far ahead because so much of our talent, not being able to get expressed anywhere else, went into the field of music. So we had personnel overload there. And it's no wonder, whereas Whites with talent, creative Whites could go into any number of fields so there was a spread there, a kind of dilution effect.

KT: What was it like in your family, your home? Where did you live? What was your street like? What was your daily life like, say in your first ten or twelve years?

HJ: Well, I remember it as just being continuous excitement. (Chuckles) All kinds. First of all, my father entertained us. There was always entertainment. He was a ventriloquist, he could throw his voice. He would put on little plays. He would throw his voice out of the trunk in the cellar, scare the living bejesus out of us, to use the Irish expression, but that's from my grandfather's side. He could juggle. He could---well, I told you he could manipulate the deck of cards. So he was always doing tricks, when he was around, to entertain us. My mother had a beautiful voice, sang. And I remember growing up putting on little plays, theatricals, with my brothers and sisters. And we always entertained ourselves and we always had company.

KT: Your mother did not work.

HJ: For a long period of time, she didn't, until we came to New York. And . . .

KT: So that was sort of a luxury for a Black woman at that period of time . . .

HJ: [Yes. Yes.]

KT: . . . to not work and being able to stay home with the children . . .

HJ: Well, then most times, my father was a good provider with his various alternative entrepreneurial activities. And I wouldn't say that we were poor. We were fairly well off. There were some moments when my father would get arrested and convicted and go to jail, which he did three times, that things were a little hard. But then friends of the family, friends of my father, would always see that we had something to eat. So I don't ever remember suffering from missed meal cramps.

KT: What about clothes? Did you always have the clothes that you

needed? And electricity or whatever was . . .

HJ: Not always. Well, we didn't get--we didn't move out of a neighborhood that had, into a neighborhood that had electricity until I was about, oh, ten years old. Before that, we always had kerosene lamps. And I remember sitting up many a night doing homework beside a kerosene lamp. And . . .

KT: Was your home a big home or a small home or . . .

HJ: The most rooms we ever had was two bedrooms. My mother and father would sleep in one room. My sisters would sleep in the other bedroom, and the three boys, we'd sleep in the living room. Yeah.

KT: Did you have chores to do?

HJ: With five kids, I was the oldest, we not only had chores. My mother also had some friends come in and help her, which, now I look back, we were really relatively well off in a poor neighborhood that she would have someone come in and do ironing. Of course, my father loved her dearly and I guess these were some of the things he would do to show that, that his wife didn't have to work. And she was also ambitious, I would say, and wanted to get ahead. My father hung out with mostly underworld people, those were his associations. My mother objected to that. She was always trying to get us to go to church. My father would never go to church. And as I look back on our church-going experience I can see there was a kind of progression from lower-class church, like the Holy Rollers with sawdust and a tent. Then the next step was the Baptist church. Then the next thing I know we were going to A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal], Zion, and then the top of the ladder, at least in our church-going experience when we arrived at the Church of the Epiphany which was (an) Episcopal church. The minister there was West Indian, a very articulate West Indian named Rev. [George] Plaskett.

KT: Plaskett?

HJ: Plaskett.

KT: Mm hmm.

HJ: And he was able to get Trinity Church in New York to become the sponsor of the Church of the Epiphany. And I wound up being an acolyte there. So I was always going in two directions. I was being taught to hustle by my father, play pool, play basketball, all those things. At the same time, my mother wanted me to go forward in the church. And I used to read the Psalms on Sunday night. And I think Rev. Plaskett was grooming me to enter the ministry. But that career perspective was aborted when my sister Winnie, who was an excellent dancer, emerged from our family entertainments into a professional entertainer. And Elida Webb, who was one of the choreographers for the musical Flying Colors came out to Orange.

She had heard about my sister Winnie and her dancing ability through the grapevine and she interviewed Winnie, asked my mother and father if they would allow her to be in the show Flying Colors. She was fifteen at the time. And my mother and father agreed and for about a year, my mother commuted to New York so my sister could dance as a chorus girl in the show Flying Colors.

KT: And where was Flying Colors being shown?

HJ: That was being shown at the Imperial Theater on 44th Street in Broadway, right in the heart of the theater district. And once in a while, I was allowed, permitted to go along, so I could see the Gay White Way, the white lights and everything. Gay meant something different back in those days. And I got exposed to New York life, 1932, I was seventeen at the time. And then in the same year, Elida told my sister Winnie that if she wanted to, she could be in the Cotton Club show, she was such a good dancer.

KT: Had she had formal training?

HJ: No, she's just a natural dancer. She had, I call it photographic muscles. Whatever she saw, she could reproduce. The same movement and sound. In fact, Bill Robinson taught her one of his most complicated routines in forty-five minutes.

KT: Bill Robinson, the Bojangles . . .

HJ: [Yes.] Bojangles. And she danced with him for a week at the Alhambra Theater, right after her engagement in Flying Colors. By the way, Agnes DeMille was the choreographer of the Flying Colors show. And it was the first show on Broadway that had both Black and White chorus girls dancing on the stage at the same time. It was the first desegregated show in that sense. Well, my sister started at the Cotton Club the end of 1932, by which time my father and mother decided since Winnie had become the chief breadwinner of the family, that we should move to Harlem. And my father (had) arranged through his connections with the mob, that owned the Cotton Club, to get an apartment right next door to the Cotton Club. (The) Cotton Club was 642 Lenox and we lived in 646. So I could hear Cab Calloway shouting "Hi-de, hi-de-ho" in my bedroom. So (if) you (want to) talk about what was the family life like, it was continuous excitement.

KT: When you speak of, "She was the chief breadwinner," what were the wages in those days?

HJ: Well, in Flying Colors, she got something like thirty-five dollars a week and when she went to the Cotton Club, she got thirty-six [dollars] a week as a chorus girl. That's, let's see. The 1967 dollar is worth three and a half 1988 dollars. I would imagine the 1933 dollar is worth fifteen American dollars so that would be the equivalent of about . . .

KT: Thirty-five times fifteen.

HJ: In the neighborhood of \$500 a week. So that when you made the Cotton Club chorus line, you were considered in the aristocracy of show business. Chorus or principal, Cotton Club people were regarded like that in the community.

KT: Now the Cotton Club, just a little bit of background on the Cotton Club. That was primarily Black entertainers and White audiences run by the mob, would you say?

HJ: Oh, [yes]. Oh, [yes]. Definitely. And there are many books written about that, and the film [Cotton Club] was quite accurate in showing the mob control of the Cotton Club.

KT: And the qualifications were just excellence in dance in order to be . . .

HJ: Well, for chorus girls it was also a color standard. What my sister laughingly used to refer to as paperbag brown. And once in a while, they would have a girl who was darker [than that] in the chorus line if she was an exceptional dancer, like Billie Yarborough or Lucille Wilson, who later married Louis Armstrong. But most of the Cotton Club girls were light colored. I think perhaps, well, that was a reflection of the racism at that time. I was amazed in looking at the 1920 census to see that three populations were listed in the census: White, mulatto, and Black. So that being mulatto in those days was considered an advantage, rather than Black . . .

KT: In the census? White, mulatto, and Black?

HJ: Yes, yes. And it was this sort of color prejudice that explained the color of the chorus girls. They tried to get them all to be about the same color. But they couldn't be Black or very dark, with exceptions. Brilliant dancer or do comedy, tagging the line as it's called. That didn't apply to the principals so that Bojangles who was dark brown was acceptable and Louis Armstrong. They didn't draw the color line on the males. But the emphasis was on light colored. I've come to think that it probably represented on the subconscious level the implication that here, you were witnessing products of previously existing interracial sex relations. So that added a kind of subconscious atmosphere to the sensuality that was the stock and trade of Cotton Club shows. And the White folks used to come from all over the world to see this display of Black sensuality, as well as the great talent in tap dancing and the music itself. But that was the big appeal: the exotic quality of the show. There was always a jungle number in the show, you know. And of course, the White tourist who came up to Harlem would get that frisson from being so close to primitive nature (chuckles) in its rawest.

KT: So your sister would dance every night? Was it an every night kind of a job?

HJ: [Yes. Yes.] There was a show, two shows a night, every night of the week, except Sunday. On Sunday nights, they would have a guest show comprised of top stars from Hollywood, Broadway, White stars, who would be guests of the Cotton Club and they would get up and do a turn. It was probably the only place where you had both White artists and Black artists performing on the stage, same stage, at different times, of course. Blacks were not permitted to be audience. So it was Black entertainers, White audience, until the March 19th riot in Harlem in 1935 when there was just an explosion of anger against the unemployment and the high prices and the high rents. People were in a squeeze and they just exploded.

KT: So there was an incident to set it off?

HJ: [Yes. Yes.] It was reported, the rumor was that the police had killed a twelve-year-old boy for shoplifting in Woolworth's. And it hadn't happened, but that rumor went all through Harlem, and by four o'clock that afternoon, crowds of people were just roaming the streets. And by early evening, it had started to get violent and people were throwing bricks through windows and just looting the stores left and right.

KT: And where were you?

HJ: Well I was at the Cotton Club the night of the riot and . . .

KT: The show went on . . .

HJ: Watched the show. The show went on. The Duesenbergs and Cadillacs were pulling up. But after the show, we went out in the street and went down to 125th Street. Some of the rioting was still going on. You could hear police shooting at people on 8th Avenue under the elevat(ed) [train]. And there were still mobs roaming. The police were at bay. They couldn't control it. And it didn't die down until, oh, I would say, the next morning. There was still sporadic . . .

KT: Were people killed?

HJ: I don't know of any killings. There was some shooting. People wounded. A lot of arrests. [According to the New York Times, one person died and over 100 Blacks and Whites were shot, stabbed, clubbed, or stoned in the conflict.] But the city was not prepared for this. And the police were just caught off balance. At that time, there were maybe one or two Black cops. Most police were White so it was like colonial troops in a colony situation where they were totally overwhelmed.

KT: So then . . .

HJ: Mayor [Fiorello] LaGuardia issued a statement which was utterly wrong, that it was directed against Whites and it would be dangerous for Whites to go to Harlem. [LaGuardia's statement blamed "a few

irresponsible individuals" for the riot, not the majority of Harlem's "splendid, decent, law-abiding" residents. Source: New York Times] It was not a race riot as some of the press tried to make it. It was an economic riot. And White tourism dropped off 75 percent in Harlem, after that. And that, of course, undermined the Cotton Club trade which was mostly White. They tried to do a couple of shows in late 1935, '36, but by June '36, the management decided to move the Cotton Club downtown. [The original Cotton Club closed February 16, 1936 and opened downtown on September 24th of the same year. Source: The Cotton Club, 1977.] And at the same time, ironically, that they moved downtown, they ended the segregation policy. So the Cotton Club downtown was integrated, as far as audience was concerned. That was one of the positive . . .

KT: And the same entertainers?

HJ: Yes, yes. Bill Robinson, who had worked at the Cotton Club uptown. [Duke] Ellington, Cab [Calloway], they all appeared downtown.

KT: And would Blacks venture to go downtown?

HJ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. After the riot, we felt that we had some power. It had been demonstrated in what the White establishment had considered to be a very negative way, but those of us who had some kind of political orientation saw the riot as a very positive demonstration of what Black power could become. It could become a political force.

KT: You speak of political awareness. Did you---when did you start to, yourself, develop a political consciousness?

HJ: Well, I was already a voracious reader from childhood. By the time I was fifteen, I had already gone through all of Jack London's novels and one that had the greatest impact on me was his novel Martin Eden. Martin Eden, which was about a young laundry worker born from a poor family who slugged his way up the social ladder until he became a leading capitalist in California and at the same time never lost his socialist convictions as a result of the oppression that he felt as a worker. In his early life he became a socialist, but he decided [that] he was going to make it within the capitalist system despite (his radicalism), as an individual. Jack London was one of these rugged individualist-type socialists. That book had a tremendous impact on my thinking. And I was probably a socialist by the time I was fifteen, in my outlook.

KT: Mm hmm. Were you going to high school in New York then?

HJ: No, in Orange. I stopped going to high school after coming into contact with the Cotton Club and the nightlife of Harlem (in 1933).

KT: So what would you do in the daytime? If you were at the Cotton Club . . .

HJ: Sleep.

KT: You would sleep in the daytime. And your mom and your dad would sleep in the daytime?

HJ: Yeah, everybody slept because we (were) night people. My sister worked at the Cotton Club. My father became a waiter at the Cotton Club. So after the show was over, the show ended about three [o'clock] a.m., we would go out in Harlem to the after-hour spots.

KT: Which ones, like Smalls?

HJ: Smalls.

KT: Was that there then?

HJ: Yeah. Smalls used to have breakfast dances started at four [o'clock] a.m. on Monday morning and the breakfast dance would last until twelve [o'clock] noon, Monday. So we'd get to bed about one o'clock and sleep until showtime at the Cotton Club which (had its) first show (at) ten [o'clock] p.m. So we'd have to be in half hour before the show, 9:30 p.m.

KT: When you think of show business today, I often think of the musicians and the drugs and the hard life and the total kind of wildness. Would it be a same kind of wild life of musicians at the early days or it would be a modified . . .

HJ: It would be wild.

KT: Uh huh.

HJ: It was wild life.

KT: Individualist people, creative people . . .

HJ: Individualistic, a lot of creativity. Don't forget the renaissance was just petering out at this time. And the whole concept of the new Negro had come out, so all of [us] were new Negroes. I mean, there was no previous pattern that had been established for our behavior.

KT: Maybe you can speak a little bit about the new Negro.

HJ: Well, Harlem, very much like the Latin Quarter in Paris and the cabaret section of Berlin or the cabaret section of Rome, was an international gathering place for cosmopolitans who didn't consider themselves circumscribed by conventions or normal customs that what we call the straight or the square world was governed by. And so, our life was not a nine-to-five existence. We only worked when we had to. But the idea of working, except when we had to, was just not part of our vocabulary. (Chuckles) And we regarded people who had a job as being manipulated, being suckers, and choosing perhaps

the lowest form of existence when, if you didn't have a job, didn't have to go to work, you could live your life as you wanted to. And that meant, everything went. That included what is now called illicit sex, relationships between men and women, women and women, men and men. It was an across-the-board kind of thing. In fact, us coming from Orange, New Jersey, [we] were somewhat conventional to most of the people in show business. We were regarded as small town people but because my father had had some contact with nightlife in the underworld as a card dealer and a pool hustler, it gave us a passport to be accepted, even though we came from a small town.

KT: Did you run into or get a chance to rub elbows or become friends with or whatever, some of the luminous figures of the Harlem Renaissance--any of the writers, poets, aside from the dancers and the entertainers.

HJ: Well, I knew Countee Cullen, Harold Jackman, Bruce Nugent, (Claude McKay, and Aaron Douglas). I didn't know Eric Walrond but I knew his brother very well. His brother used to play bass at an after-hours spot called Dickey Wells with Kenny Watts and his Kilowatts Band. And Kenny Watts and his Kilowatts Band, they had one bass, they had a piano. Kenny Watts played piano, Carol Walrond played bass, and all of the other instruments were kazoos.

KT: Oh, my goodness.

HJ: And they used to make a sound like Duke Ellington, the kazoo band. I guess Dickey Wells, he was a sharp operator, he was a pimp, hustler, and nightclub impresario, decided that he was going to keep his costs down so he didn't hire regular musicians. But they could play. They could play. And . . .

KT: I'm going to stop this side of the tape now and turn it over.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-12-2-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Howard Johnson (HJ)

June 6, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is June 6 and I'm at the home of Howard Johnson. This is Kathryn Takara. We're going to do an interview on Black history.

So Howard, tell me a little bit more about what it was like to be at the Cotton Club on any particular night of the week.

HJ: Mm hmm. Well, the Cotton Club, and I'm speaking from the viewpoint of a nineteen year old, from Orange, New Jersey. As far as I was concerned, it was the most exciting place on earth. I had first heard Duke Ellington when I was twelve years old in 1927, a play on national hookup from the Cotton Club.

KT: That was radio, national hookup?

HJ: [Yes.] And I remember distinctly both Norman Brokenshire and Ted Husing, they were the leading announcers of that day, coming on and talking about, "You're now going to hear Duke Ellington and his jungle band broadcasting from the Cotton Club, where Hollywood, Broadway, and Park Avenue [celebrities] rub elbows up in Harlem." And you'd hear Duke's music. (HJ imitates music.) And that thrilled me, just that sound, because it was the sound I had never heard before in my life. The Ellington sound was different. It was new and I identified with it. In fact, I went down after a few broadcasts, and got a bunch of my buddies, and we got kazoos, washtubs, tissue paper on a comb, and organized our own reproduction of the Ellington band. In Irving Overby's cellar (chuckles) playing Ellington's tunes. It was a riot. So I was hooked.

Now that's seven years before I'd become a dancer at the Cotton Club. So I had seven years to accumulate a love for the Ellington music. So, when I was told that I had passed the audition and was going to be in the 1934 show, it was just like being in seventh heaven. And this show was an effort on the part of the Cotton Club leadership to outdo its "Stormy Weather" show with Ethel Waters, which was the hit of 1933. So they added ten chorus boys--the "Stormy Weather" show only had chorus girls and show girls. They added ten chorus boys, who were called "The Ten Dancing Demons" and

that meant. . . . Let's see, ten chorus boys, ten chorus girls and eight show girls. That meant in the production numbers, you had twenty-eight people on the floor, plus the principals, whoever was doing it.

KT: What is the difference between a show girl and a chorus girl?

HJ: Well, chorus girls tend to be smaller, more dancer types. And show girls are usually bigger, statuesque. We called them stallions. The chorus girls were ponies.

KT: So who were the principals when you worked?

HJ: For that show, they got Adelaide Hall, who had been a star of Blackbirds of 1928, 1930. And Pops and Louie, who were a young dance team very much like the Nicholas Brothers. And they had Avon Long, who later played Sporting Life in Porgy and Bess. And they had Leitha Hill, who was a traditional blues singer; Roy Atkins, who was a great flash dancer; and Paul Meeres and his wife Barbara, who were an adagio-type dance team--evening dress and that sort of thing. And they also had a comedy act, Swan and Lee. Johnny Lee later became the lawyer in the "Amos and Andy" television show. And let's see, there were---we had an opening. We had a soft-shoe, "As Long as I Live." Bobby Connelly was brought in from Hollywood to stage the choreography for the soft-shoe, "As Long as I Live."

KT: Who's Bobby Connelly?

HJ: He was sort of in the same class as Busby Berkeley. He had choreographed a number of Broadway shows. He went to Hollywood. His specialty was tap routines. He was brought in and he staged the "As Long as I Live" number, which Avon Long sang. And Avon brought Lena [Horne] out of the chorus to sing the bridge (of) "As Long as I Live."

KT: So Lena was in the chorus? Lena Horne was in the chorus . . .

HJ: She was in the chorus.

KT: Had she been there for several years also?

HJ: Yes, she had been there---she joined the club in '33.

KT: And the club started when?

HJ: Well, I don't have an accurate date on that, but the mob is reported to have bought or taken the club from Jack Johnson around 1922. [The Cotton Club opened in the fall of 1923. Source: The Cotton Club]

KT: Oh, that long?

HJ: Yeah.

KT: Oh.

HJ: But, they didn't start having big shows until '26, '27.

KT: So then back to any particular night you would walk in, but from your particular view, you would walk in, and then what would you see, I mean this show. It would be the . . .

HJ: Well, we came in the front door and there's a red staircase which you'll see in the film The Cotton Club. I have the film here by the way if you want to look at it. And the film actually reproduced the Cotton Club almost exactly as it was, except that for filming purposes they had to move the cameras around to get shots on stage so it was bigger, actually, than the real Cotton Club. But it was an exact proportional replica.

KT: How did you feel when you worked on the film and you saw the project . . .

HJ: I used to get goose pimples every time I walked on the set. It was like time travel, you know. You get into your space machine and travel back fifty years. That's what I was doing every day I walked on the set. Very transforming experience. It brought to life my youth. I think that happened to all of the performers that were associated with the film. But [at] any rate, we had Bobby Connelly stage the "As Long as I Live" number and "Here Goes a Fool." And Elida Webb did the opening and the breakfast ball number, which was the finale, and Gluck Sandor, a Hungarian affiliate of Mary Wigman, famous German choreographer from the Bauhaus school in Germany, was imported from Hungary to stage the "Ill Wind" number, which was (the) big production number. "Ill Wind" was modeled on "Stormy Weather." Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, the composer and lyricist of "Stormy Weather," came back with "Ill Wind" and it's still a popular song. It never quite had the impact that "Stormy Weather" [did], but it made a nice second place. So it was (a) good, very exciting show, and they also brought in a new band to the Cotton Club to play that show. Previously, they had Duke Ellington, Cab, or the Mill's Blue (Rhythm) Band. But for this show they want to bring in a new orchestra that had upset Harlem. In the spring of that year, a band that played in the Ellington mode, but was younger and even more modern, the Jimmie Lunceford Band . . .

KT: Jimmie. . . .

HJ: Jimmie Lunceford.

KT: Lunceford.

HJ: Yeah.

KT: I've heard of him.

HJ: With---well, there's some. . . . In fact, Sy Oliver, who was a

trumpeter in that band just died a week ago Friday. So you have all of this talent: Adelaide Hall, Lena Horne, Pops and Louie, Roy Atkins, the twenty-eight chorus girls and chorus boys and show girls, and then you had the audience, which was a who's who of prime movers in New York. Any night we could see, you know, governors, judges, Babs Hutton, the Donahue brothers, inheritors of the Woolworth fortune, [Arturo] Toscanini in the audience, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker. The elite of show business and the business world and politics were the audience. So we were always psyched up, when the music hit up and we hit that stage. We were there to perform. And it was in the middle of the depression, 75 percent of Black males unemployed in Harlem, and here we are, dancing in these fine clothes and making thirty-five dollars a week, which . . .

KT: Which in those days was excellent money?

HJ: Well, when you're unemployed, thirty-five dollars a week is like a million dollars. And most of the community was on welfare. So the people who worked at the Cotton Club were part of an elite in Harlem and were looked up to and respected because the Cotton Club was regarded as the pinnacle of show business for Blacks.

KT: What about the feeling that existed between the various performers, the cast? Was it a supportive feeling or was there a lot of rivalry?

HJ: I would say the prevailing spirit was that of a family. But, some of the stars [were] very egocentric. And someone like Ethel Waters, you know, looked down on the (other) performers. Bill Robinson was similar. Pops and Louie worked great. The Nicholas Brothers . . .

KT: Bill Robinson, is that Bojangles?

HJ: Bojangles. And there were rivalries over billing and who would close the show and that sort of thing. A lot of egos . . .

KT: Yeah.

HJ: Well, you know . . .

KT: So, it was show business.

HJ: Show business people have big egos. It was nothing out of the ordinary. I guess it was to be expected. But on the whole, there was a rapport among the members of the show. Family spirit, we gambled together, and we partied together. After the Cotton Club show closed down, 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, we would all go out. Chorus boys, chorus girls. Sometimes we would go out as a group en masse. Sometimes the boys would go one direction, the girls another, depending on what the scene was. And we were wine and dined all over Harlem. If we went to the breakfast dance at Smalls, they had a table for the Cotton Club people. And we'd get applause when we walked in. And we'd be togged. (Chuckles) It was very

exciting.

KT: So then what was the feeling when it closed [in 1940]?

HJ: Well, I would say it was sad because a lot of people, you know, put out of work.

KT: And what did people turn to for work?

HJ: Well, World War II actually brought an end to vaudeville. And after World War II, television was coming in. And that knocked out that kind of night life in any major way with the big shows.

KT: Excuse me, but I think I'm a little bit ignorant on the term vaudeville. What does---you say it brought an end to "vaudeville," does that mean . . .

HJ: Oh, vaudeville is a pre-World War II phenomenon in show business where you not only had movie theaters, but you also had theaters that had both vaudeville acts as well [as] live entertainment in between the movies. In fact, the vaudeville show was quite often more of an attraction than the movie itself. So you had live performers like Al Jolson and the Ritz Brothers and Sophie Tucker and Bill Robinson. There were acts, they would have an orchestra in the pit that might or might not play the score for the movie after the live acts shut down. And quite often [these shows were] in the movie houses which were usually big opera-style movie palaces in the '30s. And some of the theaters have been preserved as national history.

KT: So then vaudeville would differ from the theater in that they would be short vignettes . . .

HJ: Right.

KT: . . . compared to a regular, long play?

HJ: Yeah.

KT: Would be what a vaudeville would be?

HJ: Yeah. It would be about an hour with different acts.

KT: Different acts? Oh, I see. Okay, so then . . .

HJ: It might open up with a dog and pony show, ventriloquist, then a comedian, clowns, a juggling act, magician, a singer, tap dancers, acrobats. Traditional entertainment. Then there were houses which I didn't mention, vaudeville houses, that just had live vaudeville, no movie. That was the case with the Palace, that was regarded as the peak of show business, pre-World War II. If you made it at the Palace as an entertainer, you were considered--it was like someone making Hollywood and getting the Oscar.

KT: And where was the Palace?

HJ: That was at 47th Street and Broadway. In fact, when the Cotton Club moved from uptown to downtown, it moved into the Latin Quarter, which was right across the street from the Palace at 47th Street. Latin Quarter ran from 48th through 47th.

KT: And then you mentioned that once it moved, it did become integrated totally, the audience was integrated . . .

HJ: Yeah, they stopped the Jim Crow policy.

KT: So then the war came along, and then what did that mean for Black people or, in particular, entertainers who were living in New York at that time?

HJ: Well, what happened to me after the 1934 Cotton Club show closed, my sister Winnie, my brother Bobby and I formed an act called the Three Johnsons. And we got to Broadway in a show called New Faces of 1936. Imogene Coca was the star. Van Johnson was a chorus boy. That was his first Broadway show and he used to call himself the Fourth Johnson. (Chuckles) And we had a good act. We got good write-ups. We also did what was then called doubling. We, after the legit theater closed down, New Faces of 1936, which was a musical revue, we worked in a nightclub on 57th Street, The Normandy Room. We also worked another nightclub with Erskine Hawkins Band, the Harlem Uproar House. And we worked another posh club, Leon and Eddie's. In 1937, we got connected with Duke and danced in front of the Ellington orchestra at the Apollo in Duke Ellington's 1937 revue. I have the throwaways on that.

KT: What an opportunity. Now did the money get better as the time progressed or did it stay . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: Was the Cotton Club the epitome of the money?

HJ: No, the money got better.

KT: The money would get better.

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: So by the time you got to the Duke, then . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . the money was still better, yet.

HJ: I guess the three of us were making about \$150 [a week].

KT: And were you working five nights a week, or seven nights a

week . . .

HJ: Well, at the Apollo we did four shows a day. It was a rugged grind. No day off. Seven days, twenty-eight shows. It was a meat grinder. (Chuckles)

KT: And how long of a period did you have to keep that up till?

HJ: We just worked for Duke for one week. Then, I got involved in politics towards the end of '37. I was getting increasingly radicalized with the insecurity of show business, no regular week's work. And I joined the Communist party, January 1938.

KT: And how did you get in contact with them? How did that happen?

HJ: Well, a couple of my friends said, "Join the party." They had started talking to me. Asked me to come to meetings. And I respected them as thinkers. They were analytical and critical of the society. Most of the Cotton Club people didn't discuss politics; we were into show business, music. But these guys were thinking about capitalism, socialism, trade unions, that sort of thing. And I had already done a lot of reading as early as my high school days about socialism. I was very much influenced by Jack London's book, Martin Eden. My great-uncle, who was the founder of the Amsterdam News, had some socialists on his paper: Harry Haywood and Cyril Briggs, who formed the African Brotherhood. So then a part of me that had sort of lain fallow during the show business days emerged. And I sort of got back to my kind of serious, intellectual outlook which I would characterize myself as having been when I entered high school. I was a thinker-- president of the NAACP in Orange, New Jersey--junior NAACP--in 1930 before I came to New York. So when I saw the Communists in action in Harlem, it seemed to me that they were the only organization that meant business and accompanied their words with action. They were organizing the picket lines. They were organizing the demonstrations, fighting the police, putting people back in the houses after they were evicted for nonpayment of rent. And I liked that because I did not believe that the system was going to change itself. And once I joined the Communist party with the name recognition that I had as a performer, knowing everybody in show business and in Harlem, the Communist party saw me as a potential leader and they grabbed me up, sent me to a leadership training school, and I became a full-time functionary after I was in the Communist party six months.

KT: Oh. And did they pay you then?

HJ: Yeah. Not well. Ten dollars a week. (Chuckles) But that was better than nothing.

KT: Did your . . .

HJ: And I remained a Communist from 1938 until 1956. My party

organizational experiences were only interrupted by my service in World War II in the 92nd Division. But even then, I was actively trying to organize the [Black] enlisted men in the 92nd to struggle against Jim Crow and segregation both at Fort Huachuca [Arizona] as well as when I got to Italy. And as a result of my organizing efforts, I was just before--well, White officers were being fragged [e.g., killed or wounded by a member of their own unit] in the 92nd because they had generated so much hostility among the enlisted men before we went overseas. When we got overseas, where we were dealing with live ammo, a lot of White officers got popped by our side. And they had a shortage of officers, and [Lt. Gen.] Mark Clark, Fifth Army [commander], decided that they needed some Black officers. So they sent out a ruling that any enlisted man, any Black enlisted man with an IQ [intelligence quotient] over 105, could apply for Officer's Candidate School [OCS]. I applied. [COH could find no reference to this IQ standard.]

Two weeks before I was (to go) to OCS, I was promoted to sergeant and assigned to leadership of a liaison section which I knew nothing about. I had been a scout corporal. My business was reconnaissance and scouting. And I was promoted to sergeant over the head of a corporal in that section and other trained men in that section who knew the job and they were instructed to teach me. So I was in a completely untenable position, because I had their anger. The previous sergeant and the sergeant before him had all been killed in action. I later surmised that the captain of my outfit who came in just about a month before I applied for OCS, was probably an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent assigned to handle that particular battery politically. Because I would do the firing and the prior (captain) was Elvie Whitlock from Texas. He was scared to go up front. So I used to go up and do his missions. So I would come back. They'd [e.g., the Black enlisted men] call me Captain (Johnson). That was a Black way of getting back at his Texan White racism. He was removed and Jack Hayes was brought in. Jack Hayes gave me the promotion and sent me behind the lines on what was essentially a suicide mission with the 442nd outfit, which was used for that purpose by the high command. Any(time) that [there] was going to be a lot of casualties they threw in the nisei. It was merciless. That's why when I got here to Hawai'i, I thought it was going to be, you know, well here are my war buddies and they're in power here.

KT: But they forget.

HJ: Yeah, but they forgot why they got in power. So that's where I lost this bit of flesh and accumulated these scars.

KT: Behind the German lines?

HJ: Behind the German lines.

KT: Oh. So then the war ended. You spent how much time actually in the service?

HJ: Two and a half years. I went in September '43, got wounded April 5, '46 [1945], and was hospitalized and finally released as rehabilitated January 1946.

KT: And while you were in, did you have anybody you could share the Communist ideology with?

HJ: Oh, [yes].

KT: Did you have study groups or . . .

HJ: Oh, [yes]. I was an open Communist. They knew I was a Communist.

KT: But it didn't matter in the war . . .

HJ: No.

KT: Was that the time we were allies with the Russians before?

HJ: Yeah, yeah. There was a lot of respect for the Russians, Soviet Union. So that my being a Communist did not operate against me among the men. I had their respect.

KT: In terms of their platform, I've heard that they made a lot of their party platform to appeal to the American Black or Negro person.

HJ: Oh, [yes].

KT: Can you speak specifically of anything about self-determination or whatever that were attractive to you as ideology that related to Black people?

HJ: [Yes,] I very much believed that Black people in the United States were a nation, were an oppressed nation. In fact, in later research, I checked out editorials written by my great-uncle in the Amsterdam News. And they were talking about the Negro nation back in 1915 before there was ever a Communist party. So that the idea that national consciousness was Communist-inspired is a complete misreading of history. Blacks knew that they were a nation long before there were Communists and didn't need the Communists to come and tell them so.

However, what I liked about the Communists was that they elaborated that position into a whole theoretical structure and related it to imperialism on a world scale, so that I saw Black nationhood in the context of it being a part of the entire world system and that, therefore, there was an identification between Blacks in the United States, Blacks in South America, Browns in South America, Chinese in China, and I saw it as a worldwide system so it strengthened my appreciation and understanding of the African colonial situation prior to World War II. And when the United Nations was formed [in 1947] and you had one colony after another liberating itself or being liberated as a result of World War II, my fondest dreams were

realized and I thought that shortly after World War II just as Kenya and Ghana and these countries achieved liberation, that we Blacks in the United States would achieve an equivalent liberation as Black people in what had been a White racist society. And I thought that by 1950 or 1955, that we'd have a completely integrated United States. Little did I realize (chuckles) that the Cold War would reverse all of that forward movement.

KT: So, between the time that, let's see, you joined the Communist party and you worked full time, you were in New York?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: And then the war came on and you decided that you would join the army, is that correct?

HJ: No, I was drafted.

KT: You were drafted.

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: You were drafted to join the army.

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: And during that time you were organizing full time were you doing any other job or it was just . . .

HJ: No.

KT: . . . that . . .

HJ: No, I was full-time Communist, yeah.

KT: And then . . .

HJ: I was responsible for educational work in New York State which had half the membership of the Communist party. So I was responsible for the organization of training schools, classes, what we call our agitation and propaganda, the distribution of leaflets, the content (of) articles (in) our theoretical organ Political Affairs so that I was very much involved in the intellectual activities of the Communist party in addition to being an organizer.

KT: And how many Black people were working with you?

HJ: Oh, our Black membership was about, out of 50,000 members, I would say we had about 1,500. No, that was Harlem alone. It must have been at least 12 percent. I would say, in New York State, there were probably about 6,000 Blacks in the Communist party. And they were mostly based in the big Black neighborhoods, like Harlem, where we had 1,000 members, Bed-Sty [Bedford-Stuyvesant area], maybe 900.

South Jamaica, Buffalo, Albany. This was a disciplined cadre which worked knowingly in the Black churches and the Elks, NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and (other) organizations, so that when we wanted to move in the Black community, we had troops there that acted as a unifying force in the Black community.

KT: Was there any problem with the Communist party being essentially non-religious and the Black community being very religious or it accommodated itself to them?

HJ: It accommodated, because most Blacks were religious so that some of the theoretical questions around atheism and religion were soft-pedaled in the Communist organizations in the Black community. In the mid-'30s we had a united front with Father Divine [a Black charismatic religious figure who proposed an interracial theocratic communal society]. And many Father Divine members saw a similarity between the economic policies of sharing in the Communist movement and the Father Divine what-you-(might)-call, theosophical communism, because they shared. So we had many Divinites (who) worked in the Communist party, some of our most active members.

KT: I wonder if we could go back just a little bit and then we can keep going forward again. Were you in New York or not yet or did you hear anything about Marcus Garvey and his great movement? I know that must have been when you were still in New Jersey, how did that touch you or your life or . . .

HJ: Oh, Ready Money was a furniture dealer, a secondhand furniture dealer. And he was a Garveyite in Orange, New Jersey. And he used to have the Black nationalist flag out in front of his place. And he extolled Garveyism, but coming from a kind of tri-racial background that I did, Black nationalism didn't particularly appeal to me. I saw it as regressive and inspiring hatred between dark Blacks and light Blacks because the Garveyism at that time was quite crude and if you were a high yellow nigger, nobody thought you were worth anything. And vice versa, among lighter Blacks, there was a lot of anti-dark Black prejudice. In fact, as late as 1920, the United States census, I think I mentioned this to you, had three divisions: Negro, White, and mulatto. So I never was particularly attracted to the Garvey movement primarily because of my own family upbringing where we knew we had White cousins and Black cousins and Indian cousins and all that, so it just didn't make sense to me.

KT: Okay, well, let's move back up then. I just wanted to get a little comment there on Garvey. Move back up to after the war, when you came back and you were released from the hospital. Then what happened?

HJ: I came back into activity in the Communist party. I was promoted from county---well, I at first became county educational director. New York County was the biggest county organization. From '46 to '49. And during that same period, I was assigned to help build a

national Negro veterans organization which was called the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America [UNAVA]. And that had the backing of the party and I was assigned by the party to work in that along with my duties as educational director of the county organization. So I was sort of wearing two hats at the time. When UNAVA was formed, I was elected national vice-commander in charge of education, which fit my training, and the other national vice-commander was Coleman Young, who was national vice-commander in charge of labor. Because at that time he was a shop steward in the auto workers union and [a] very prominent trade unionist in Detroit. Coleman and I were very good friends. I don't know where he's going, coming out and supporting [Walter] Mondale in this last election [the 1984 Presidential election]. Well, I know where he's going but I never expected, I never anticipated he would be a bourgeois mayor of Detroit. But Coleman's a great guy, nevertheless. But I think that it was his party training that (helped) him to move forward as he did, (in part). [COH cannot verify these statements. Young denies having ever been a Communist, although the National Negro Labor Council which he founded and directed "aroused the interest of the House Un-American Activities Committee" in the 1950s. Source: The Negro Almanac, 1983.]

KT: He's the mayor of Detroit.

HJ: [Yes.] Our central activity was around the issue of terminal leave pay. Terminal leave pay was an amount of money that the government gave. An act, millions of dollars was appropriated [in 1946] to pay released veterans terminal leave pay as compensation for their absence from home, loss of employment during the war period. And the amounts of terminal leave pay ran anywhere from \$25 to \$300 per person. There were over a million Black veterans from the South and I would say that 75 percent of them worked on plantations or were tenant farmers.

KT: Before entering the war?

HJ: [Yes.] So when they came back, and they had access to this terminal leave pay, the average pay was \$200 a year. So if the Black veteran got his terminal leave pay, it would be like getting in a lump sum more than a year's pay. And it would be a source of liberation for him. He could go North, leave the plantation. So, what they did in the South, the institutionalized racism operated to make it impossible for most Black veterans to get their terminal leave pay. Why? The law was, you pick up your application at any United States post office. But on the plantations, Black employees were only allowed to go into the county seat where there was a post office on Saturday afternoons, after the post office closed. And they had to have a pass to go into town, from the plantation to the county seat. And they would get, you know, overnight pass from Saturday noon to Sunday evening. So, we were interested in liberation, and we saw utilizing the terminal leave pay, since it was a government-ordained cash distribution as an instrument for breaking the stranglehold of the plantations on these million Black veterans.

KT: Let's break just for a minute.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: Go ahead.

HJ: Okay. So what we did, we sent delegations to the War Department and to a number of congressmen and explained the situation. And as a veterans organization, we got agreement to be allowed to be a distributing agency. Take it out of the hands of the office and we were given, oh, 2 million terminal leave pay application blanks, which we distributed all over the country. We (had) a coalition formed with the Black Elks and the National Baptist Convention, and both organizations agreed to assist us through the local Elks chapters and the Baptist church. So we penetrated. We sent organizers throughout the South--Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina. I handled North Carolina. Distributing through a network of Black veterans, which we were contacting. And as a result of our efforts over 100 million dollars in terminal leave pay was distributed to Black veterans.

And it acted as an organizing instrument for Black communities throughout the South. The first demonstration against the poll tax in the White primary was organized by us in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1946. We got 200 Black veterans to walk into Jackson, Mississippi, to insist on being registered, because they had performed a service for the country. The average Black citizen didn't have that (clout). The Deacons for [Defense and] Justice, which was an armed group came up in '55, was organized by former members of our organization.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: Okay, we'll continue now.

HJ: (I was) also heavily involved at the same time in a number of campaigns. One was to eliminate discrimination in Stuyvesant Town, which was a big middle-class housing project funded by a Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and they barred Blacks. It was in downtown New York on the east side and at that time, one of our leading Communists, Black Communists, Ben Davis, Jr., was on the New York City Council.

KT: Oh.

HJ: And he led the campaign, but I participated in it to defeat the discrimination that was policy and we actually got White tenants who were members of the party, to house Blacks and turn their apartment over to them and we had a siege there for weeks and finally won their right to be there. As part of the strategy of Metropolitan Life Insurance [they] said they would build an equivalent project in Harlem, which was called Riverton and they did. And that's where a lot of the Black bourgeoisie resided, moved down from Sugar Hill.

Those were nice apartments.

The other campaign I was very much involved in was Jim Crow and the baseball. And we finally won that with Jackie Robinson being brought on to the Dodgers in 1947.

KT: And before that Blacks were not allowed to play the major leagues?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: And they had their own . . .

HJ: Baseball (teams) . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

HJ: Sugar Hill was a neighborhood, literally on a hill in Harlem that ran from 145th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue up to about 165th Street from Edgecomb Avenue, which was an avenue that ran along a bluff above Edgecomb Park, which was down at the bottom, between Bradhurst and Edgecomb Avenue. Edgecomb Avenue is up on this bluff and that was the eastern border of Sugar Hill over to Amsterdam Avenue, which was the western edge of Sugar Hill.

KT: So it was about twenty blocks long and several blocks wide.

HJ: Let's see, Edgecomb, St. Nicholas, Convent, Amsterdam. It was a strip.

KT: And then who lived there?

HJ: Beyond Amsterdam on the western edge of Sugar Hill were mainly tenement houses, but the nice brownstones and highrise apartment buildings were between Edgecomb and Amsterdam. And that terrain was called Sugar Hill. A lot of the Black celebrities, show business, writers, entertainers, musicians, real estate people, politicians, that's where they lived. Adam Clayton Powell lived on Sugar Hill. Walter White, Lester Granger, Etta Moten, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Benny Carter. Benny Carter lived in the same building as I did, 75 St. Nicholas (Place). Because as soon as we were successful in show business, we had started down in the valley. The gangsters got an apartment right next door to the Cotton Club for my family, 646 Lenox. The Cotton Club was 642 Lenox. As soon as we began making money in show business, we moved up to Sugar Hill, 40 St. Nicholas Place. Then, we moved across the street to 75 St. Nicholas Place, where Benny Carter lived. Four hundred nine Edgecomb was the tallest building on Sugar Hill and that represented a cluster of the Black bourgeoisie. Oh, (HJ snaps fingers) there was so many artists and. . . . Walter White lived there. Alta

Douglas, Kenneth Spencer, the singer. Oh, what's his name, Aaron Douglas, the sculptor, many years at Fisk, and painter. He lived there.

KT: So it seems that there was this great network of people that were clustered within a . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . this . . .

HJ: [Yes, yes.]

KT: . . . this community, this . . .

HJ: And everybody knew everybody.

KT: Well, what . . .

HJ: My barbershop was at 153rd and Amsterdam. Thurgood Marshall lived in 409 and he used to get his haircut in my barbershop. And I remember the manicurist, after he got appointed to the [United States] Supreme Court, he would come in and she'd say, "Here comes Fat Lip." (Chuckles) So there was that kind of family spirit. Then he would not even think of taking offense, 'cause that's where he took off his Supreme Court robes and became one of the folk. And the performers and celebrities relished that form of contact with the grassroots, except for the phonies who got too big for their britches. But you can always tell the real ones by how they relate to the members [of the community].

KT: So then, that was the cultural meeting place and that continued, just continued?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: The whole . . .

HJ: Sugar Hill is still there. It's deteriorated somewhat because as happened nationally, as Blacks, the Black middle class has moved upward and gotten more successful in the last fifty years, become a broader strata, they have moved out of the ghetto and into the suburbs. But a very interesting phenomenon is now taking place. There is a reverse movement now back to center city and this is expressing itself in Harlem.

KT: As well?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: Are Blacks able to move back into Harlem or are Whites beginning to move into Harlem?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: There's a process . . .

HJ: Blacks and Whites. I think the master plan is that Whites would take over Harlem, but there's a conscious Black movement to preserve Harlem as a Black community, not barring Whites, but certainly not allowing a situation to become as it was formerly, a predominantly White neighborhood. In fact, there's a very specific movement called the Harlem New Renaissance Movement. And they're developing cultural centers, Black theater, having meetings of the Harlem Writers Club and these kinds of things to revive the spirit of the renaissance.

KT: So this would be, again, since the '60s . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . or a continuation from the '60s?

HJ: I would say that the '60s represented the trigger for that and it's continuing on. [We] have a whole new generation of young artists, poets.

KT: Well, let's go back in time a little bit and catch up to where we were.

HJ: I'm getting dizzy. (Chuckles)

KT: Yeah, we'll stop real shortly.

Well, we could---when you stopped working with the Communist party, when was it, or you didn't stop. You mentioned before . . .

HJ: I stopped in '56, after the Khrushchev revelations.

KT: So until '56, you were working with the educational arm . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . all the way up through.

HJ: Right.

KT: And, when did you start working with the printing union?

HJ: I became a proofreader in 1957.

KT: Okay, so after you left . . .

HJ: After I left the Communist party.

KT: Well, then why don't we stop today and then we'll tie it up . . .

HJ: Okay.

KT: . . . the next time.

HJ: Okay.

KT: Starting with when you left the Communist party.

HJ: Okay.

KT: The reasons for it.

HJ: Mm hmm.

KT: And then come up to contemporary times.

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: Sound good?

HJ: Well, I should tell you a little bit about my underground period, Communist Party.

KT: Okay.

HJ: So in 1951 to 1955.

KT: Okay, so that's what we should start with . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . next time. Okay. We'll end this tape now.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-16-3-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Howard Johnson (HJ)

June 22, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is June 22 and I'm at the home of Howard Johnson. This interview is conducted by Kathryn Takara. Now you try and talk into the mike.

HJ: I'm Howard Johnson, also known as "Stretch." We are now taping some comments on past activities.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: We will begin now. Would you like to talk a bit about your activities in the underground movement of the Communist party?

HJ: You know, actually, after World War II, when the Cold War was opened up by President Truman [in 1947] with the executive order requiring a loyalty oath on the part of federal employees, we began to talk about what kind of America would follow World War II. And by '49, there were sufficient indicators that the government, internationally with its anti-Soviet policies, which came under the heading of the Cold War and reinforced on the domestic scale by the witch-hunt, started in the federal government with Truman's loyalty order. This was accelerated by the attorney-general's subversive list of 102 left-wing organizations that was issued in 1949. [In 1949, U.S. Attorney General Tom C. Clark named a total of forty "subversive" organizations. Source: Facts on File, 1949.] And at that time, the national leadership of the Communist party, in particular [national chairman] William Z. Foster, adopted a political perspective based on what we called the Three Inevitables. It was inevitable that fascism would come to the United States. It was inevitable that there would be a third world war. And it was inevitable that the Communist party would be outlawed.

So we foresaw a duplication of the German Nazi experience in the United States and decided, based on the experience of Communist parties in other parts of the world where fascist governments took over, that we should develop an underground organization. So we divided our top leadership, of which I was a part, into three segments. One segment we called the Availables who continued to

function in the open. The second segment was the Unavailables who were linked to the Availables through a courier system. And then a third segment which we called the Deep Freeze. People who are not active at all but were just holed up somewhere in case FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] surveillance and reconnaissance exposed those who were in the Unavailable category. And we also had a fourth group who were sent out of the country, to eastern Europe and Soviet Union who. . . . We called them On Ice. So we actually had four categories of (cadre) our term for key personnel was cadre, which means the skeleton of an organization.

Because I was so well-known having been in show business and everything, it was decided that I should join the ranks of the Unavailables. But part of my apparatus got exposed, and we then made a decision that it was too risky for me to function with the Unavailables. So I went into Deep Freeze in 1953 where I got a different identity and functioned in areas out of New York, where I wasn't too well-known, operating under the security provision that I should never go out in daylight because I had a lot of name recognition and high visibility when I was in the open in the Communist party. So that was a very interesting experience. I left my family, over my wife's objections. It, I think, was a primary ingredient in our long-term separation when I came back. She had asked me, who do I love, the family or the party. I said, "I love both, but the party comes first." So I responded to the call of the party and went underground for a period from July 1951 until things began to lighten up with the 1954 congressional elections, and a year later, I came out from underground. As you can see, we moved quite cautiously. Despite the fact that many liberal Democrats won the congressional elections in '54, it was a year before I emerged from underground and rejoined my family.

During the period I was underground, I wrote articles for our theoretical journal, Political Affairs. I met with key personnel who were involved in the day-to-day leadership to make my particular contribution to policy formation and to be kept abreast of events as they transpired in the outside world. And also visited Cuba, where I met many of the people who later became the power behind the Castro throne in Cuba after 1959. I was meeting with people like Juan Martinello, Blas Roca, Lazaro Pena, all of whom were very prominent in the Cuban government after the Castro revolution. And I must say, my experience there in Cuba was that of all of the Communist parties in the Western Hemisphere, it was unanimously agreed among leaders of all of the Western Hemisphere Communist parties, that the Cuban party had stronger mass ties and a kind of flexibility and popularity among the grassroots people that most of the other parties were unable to attain. So it's no surprise to me that a Socialist government replaced [Fulgencio] Batista [y Zaldívar] when his government was overthrown. I spent many enlightening and exciting hours with the Cuban Communists, and also had the privilege of meeting leaders of the Brazilian, Argentinian, Chilean, Ecuadorian, Puerto Rican, and Mexican Communist parties when I was in Mexico City.

KT: Were most of these people considered intellectuals or not?

HJ: I would say so. Most of them had come out of the middle class, were either trained for leadership through the trade union movement, or were college graduates, writers, painters, that sort of thing. So I got a chance to meet some of the leading intellectuals and artists in the Communist parties of the different countries. So that I got a chance to meet Jorge Armado from Brazil; Octavio Paz; [David Alfaro] Siqueiros from Mexico; Encino Rivera. In Cuba, I met the Black poet, Nicolas Guillen, who was on the National Committee of the Communist party and who was a very good friend of Langston Hughes. I met similar types--I met Pablo Naruda, the poet from Chile, people from Argentine, Brazil. So, it was. . . . I also met some representatives of the French Communist party who were sent to observe a Western Hemisphere Peace Congress. Roger Garaudy who later left the French Communist party, and Paul Eluard, a great poet who committed suicide after the Khrushchev revelations in 1955. [Paul Eluard died of a stroke in 1952. The Khrushchev revelations HJ refers to were contained in a February 25, 1956 speech.] Very fine man. So that the underground experience was a very rich one and had a very important part in keeping me in the Communist movement, because I felt these international ties and the strength of this movement on an international basis and I saw it as a tremendous resource for the Afro-American movement in the United States, which was, I won't say of course, because many Blacks don't think that way who are socialists, but it was my prime interest. Specifically, how Marxism could be utilized to advance the Black movement in the United States.

So anyway, I came out in October 1955 and immediately plunged back into activity. At the same time, there was a lot of discussion in the Communist party about a secret report that had been made in the Soviet Union in February, I think, of '55. I may be wrong on these dates. Anyway, by January '56, we had already gotten indications that something was wrong in Moscow, outlined in the Khrushchev report. And by June of 1956, I had been embroiled in a series of debates within the party as to which way we should go, what evaluation we should make about the Stalin revelations by Khrushchev. And I was one of a group of people who felt that the Communist party should be liquidated because I did not see how it was possible with the decades long identification that the Communist party of America had had with Joseph Stalin and Stalinism, how it could possibly have any mass influence in the United States or be of any value to the needs of the Afro-American community.

KT: What were these revelations, I'm sorry.

HJ: Well, that everything that the capitalist press had been saying about Stalin was validated by Khrushchev. That he [Stalin] had been personally responsible for having one-third of the members, leadership of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, executed through frame-up trials; that he had been responsible for the execution of millions of people; that he was paranoid and insane and

had prevented the development of democracy within the Communist party of the Soviet Union. Well, I, having been, in a sense a high priest in what was essentially a religious movement with Stalin as the pope, and Marx and Lenin as the dual gods of the movement, was completely shattered, because I had been responsible for recruiting hundreds of people into the Communist party in Harlem, arguing for the Communist way. And I was also emotionally, psychologically, and economically tied to the Communist party. So I had the problem of how to reshape my life because I was determined to leave the Communist party. I had also decided that since the anti-Communist hysteria was so rife in the United States, that there was no need for me to add my grain of salt to this Niagara, if you want a mixed metaphor (chuckles), of anti-Communist propaganda. So, I never made any public statement about my reasons for leaving the Communist party. I just left the party. And not having any work credits other than having been in show business and [a] full-time functionary in the Communist party, paid functionary for eighteen years, I didn't have anything on my resume that would make me attractive to a bourgeois employer. So, I was at a loss as a father of a family as to how I was going to reconstitute my life to find employment. During that period, I went to the bottle; made a group of senior citizens my constant companions, Old Granddad, Old Taylor, Old Crow and Old Forester.

(Laughter)

HJ: And my tendency to alcoholism emerged in full blast and I was a very heavy drinker from that point on. Being a party leader had operated to establish some constraints for me. But once I left the party, having no foreseeable future of a positive nature, I think I was really trying to commit suicide without having to take responsibility for it.

KT: Were you living with your family at this time?

HJ: [Yes.] I was unemployed for about a year after I left the party. I finally got a job as a proofreader in a print shop in New Jersey because New York City was 100 percent [union] organized in typographic industry. And in Jersey, a couple of my comrades who had left the party also, one had remained in, told me about a union shop in Jersey that had a non-union proofroom. So I was able to get into this proofroom, become a proofreader, and they promised you a union card if you met their standards. So I worked there from 1957 to 1960. I got a union card in 1960 and the proviso was that you had to stay in Jersey for at least a year before you could get a transfer into Big Six, which was the International Typographic Union local in New York City. So I got my transfer and came into New York in 1962.

KT: Were you commuting from New York?

HJ: I was commuting from New York to New Jersey those four years and making a good dollar because proofreaders did well. And when I came

to New York, my standard of living went way up so by 1963, I was averaging \$300 a week. The 1967 dollar is worth about \$3.50 today. The 1963 dollar is probably worth about \$4.00 in purchasing power today. So I was making the equivalent in purchasing power of about \$1,200 a week in 1963. So this helped to stabilize me. It also helped to slow down my drinking, but the disease of alcoholism is one which has a feature called progression. And even though I was trying to keep constraints, the demands of the disease increased my intake. And I tried to stop four times, going in at two- or three-year intervals between 1956--when I had an episode of the d.t.'s [delirium tremens], which threw me into a psychiatric ward and a straitjacket--between 1956 and 1978, when I finally joined Alcoholics Anonymous, I went into psychiatric treatment four different times for two-year intervals. During those intervals, I didn't drink for two years. But every time I stopped and went back, my drinking accelerated.

During the course of those years, I decided that I didn't like proofreading. I didn't think it really represented a release for my creativity and talents. So in one of my psychiatric treatments, I decided that I should go to college. I had been a high school dropout and was self-educated, (and) Communist-party educated. So I wanted to round out my education and I enrolled in Columbia in 1960 and got a bachelor degree in 1966 while I was working full time. And after I got the bachelor degree, I made contact with some people that had been recommended to me by friends who had a research unit at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and I got a job as a documentation specialist. But it was part-time. I continued to proofread full time. Then in '68, I went over to another research unit, social sciences research unit, and worked there as a field supervisor on what is known in psychiatric circles as the Midtown Manhattan Study that had a questionnaire that revealed that its carefully selected 1,600 respondents who represented the population of Manhattan, that 80 percent of the population of Manhattan were sick and in need of some level of psychiatric care. That the respondents in that study matched the ethnic distribution of the population of the United States except for the Black population, because there weren't too many Blacks in the Yorkville section of Manhattan where the study was conducted. That was quite an illuminating experience for me also. In '69, I was told about an opening at the Ethical Culture schools for a project director for Fieldston School Upward Bound Program and it was an interview. It also meant being assistant to the director of the schools and a member of the faculty. So I wore three hats. So I went on to the faculty of the Fieldston School, became a teacher of Black history. I was assistant to the director in charge of community affairs and I was the director of the Fieldston School Upward Bound project, which . . .

KT: What was the Fieldston School? What kind of school was it?

HJ: Well, the Ethical Culture schools were developed by a famous German[-born] humanist named Felix Adler who started these schools

for the children of working people back at the turn of the century. But as happens with many of those forward-looking projects, the children of the students who graduated from these schools, because the schools were successful, they became successful middle-class or even upper-class figures in New York life so that over the years, the Ethical Culture schools became posh, middle-class, prestigious schools, rather than schools for workingmen and the workingmen's children. And the Upward Bound Program was designed to sort of compensate for this transition that took place. They wanted to reach out to disadvantaged youth through the Upward Bound Program. And I worked there for two years.

In '71, I was approached to become a teacher in the sociology department by some former left-wing people who were in, SUNY [State University of New York] New Paltz. And I joined the sociology department in '71 with a bachelor degree under a storm of protest from the conservative elements on campus who couldn't tolerate too many Whites getting a teaching position with a bachelor degree and they really went up in arms when a Black came in with a bachelor degree, teaching. But I stayed at New Paltz for eleven years primarily as a result of student support who picketed, demonstrated, threatened to take over the administration building every time my contract came up. So I was a thorn in the side of the SUNY at New Paltz and they were quite happy to see me retire in 1982. By that time, the student body had become more conservative, and I found myself wasting a lot of productive time combating negative attacks on me, so I decided to retire at sixty-seven, New Paltz. I started there when I was fifty-six. I had eleven good years. Generated a lot of excitement. Organized two movements--the Hudson Valley Regional Minority Council and reorganized and set into motion a community, a minority-led organization called Score in the city of Kingston, which still exists and has been funded for over \$2 million dollars since it was organized in 1978. And it's developed a low-cost housing program using solar heating, advanced high-tech approaches, and has been of great aid to [the] disadvantaged community in Kingston, New York, which is the county seat of Ulster County where SUNY New Paltz is located. By the way, Sojourner Truth was born somewhere between New Paltz and Kingston [in Hurley, New York]. And in Kingston, they celebrate Sojourner Truth Day on March 23, which is her supposed birthday. And in the course of doing research there, I came across the house that she was a maid in, where she. . . . It's an old stone house and I became very interested in her and developed a very nice slide lecture and made speeches about her on different college campuses. And, in a way, I sort of adopted her along with Frederick Douglass as an alter ego which took care of both my male and female components.

KT: I like the balance . . . (HJ chuckles.) So then, after you left SUNY, what did you decide to do?

HJ: I had already enrolled for, as a doctoral candidate at SUNY Binghamton and in '82 I started writing my dissertation which I completed by '84. But things came up like the Cotton Club film and

I was taken on by the producers of the film to be a technical advisor to the film and most of the entertainment aspects of the film are a result of a concept paper that I wrote for Francis Ford Coppola. The kind of music, the production numbers. I selected most of the music. Told them what the club looked like, what the style of life was, costumes and all of that.

KT: How long did that project last?

HJ: That lasted about. . . . I started in, around December '82 and worked through October '83. I didn't like the film because I thought it was deceiving the public to call the film the Cotton Club when most people think of the great Black entertainers of the Cotton Club--Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Adelaide Hall, Nicholas Brothers, Bojangles. All of these stars. That's what the Cotton Club evokes in people. And then they make it a gangster film. We called it The Godfather Comes to Harlem. And I had many shouting matches with Francis Ford Coppola who is a megalomaniac who doesn't take disagreement or criticism lightly.

KT: So then after that project, then you continued to do . . .

HJ: After that project, I continued to do some consultant work on a number of films. One of them was Seeing Red, in which I appeared. You never saw that?

KT: I haven't seen that.

HJ: Oh, I'll have to loan you the tape.

KT: Good.

HJ: You should look at the tape. That might bring out more questions. There's a little slot from one of the Cotton Club shows. I worked with Bob Levi on a Duke Ellington film which hasn't been released yet. And I appeared in another film by, oh what's--I can't think of his name now, on the depression.

KT: So you came back around to the theater and to show business . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . after leaving it for a while . . .

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: . . . you came back around to it?

HJ: That's right, that's right.

KT: And then, and then . . .

HJ: [Yes,] my life seems to be a series of big circles.

KT: Spiraling upward.

HJ: Spiraling upward, yeah.

KT: Then what brought you to Honolulu? How did that come about?

HJ: Well Anne and I had been lovers for quite a long period of time. We had broken up several times. She came to Hawai'i and liked it very much. And we had been in correspondence even though we were not together. And she invited me to come here and take a look. And we reconciled and I liked what I saw in Hawai'i and fell in love with it. And I decided. . . . I made a---I came here in March '86. I came back for a longer look June '86 and August '86, I moved all my stuff here and settled in. So now I'm kama'aina. And I really think Hawai'i is, of all the states in the union, the one that has the greatest possibilities for realizing the American dream of a multi-ethnic, non-racist society. So that even though I've had some difficulties in terms of the dissent and the differing levels of political awareness in the Black community, I'm committed to remain here for another four or five years. I would like to see some changes made while I can look at them. And the fact that the first major campaign that the Afro-American community undertook, that is the passage of a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday bill [in 1988 which declares the third Monday of each January a state holiday], that success convinces me that if the same kind of unity is continued, and energy expended in that direction, that even more fundamental changes can be made, of a positive nature.

KT: When you came, you observed not only many different ethnic groups but with the Black ethnic group itself, many things. Can you talk about the types of things that you observed when you came?

HJ: [Yes.]

KT: And what propelled you to take on such an active role within the community, being a relative newcomer.

HJ: [Yes,] Anne is a Quaker so my first contacts on arrival were with the Quakers. And they're a small group of about, oh, I guess, fifty or sixty people. And I didn't see operating within the social confines of that group, a proper outlet for me with my experience. So, as soon as I arrived, I began to ask around where were people in other ethnic groups because the Quakers are primarily Haole. I think there may be one or two Hawaiians, [a] couple of Chinese, [a] couple of Japanese. But they're preponderantly Haoles. And I wanted to make some contact with the non-Haole, local community.

Fortunately, and I made some friends, I would go out to demonstrations and things like that and introduce myself to people and tell them I was interested in community organization. And I formed a number of friendships with third world people and I was very fortunate in the sense that (the president of the Afro-American Association, Umar Rashaan, lived in this building). And we had

passed each other and hardly spoke. And so one day, he stopped me and said, "Mr. Johnson, would you like to come to an Afro-American Association meeting?" It was December 12, and Jesse Jackson was the guest speaker. So I went to that meeting and enjoyed it very much. Saw a lot of folks, members. And I figured that if I was going to have a base of operations, that the Afro-American Association would give me that opportunity to network in the Afro-American community.

What impressed me right off the bat was the level of acceptance. Usually it takes a while to be accepted in a community and to get to know people. But I found that through the association, I got to know a number of leading people in the Afro-American community on a very close basis, intimate level, in numbers that in any other place would probably have taken me months or years to get to know. And then in a short space of time, the association had one project, to create a Black newspaper to help it achieve its primary goal of making the Black presence visible in Hawai'i. And we saw the newspaper as a primary instrument for that. And they asked me after some couple of false starts if I would be the editor of the paper. And I agreed and that was in March '87 and I'm happy to say that we have completed a year, twelve successful issues of the paper. So, while it was not the first Black newspaper, it is the longest-standing Black newspaper ever in the state of Hawai'i. I understand there was a paper called Harrambee that had a short existence. Were you connected with that?

KT: Only indirectly, but, yeah, I did, was a little bit connected with that one.

HJ: I didn't know it at the time the Afro-Hawaii News came out. I would have asked for it to be called Harrambee in parenthesis under Afro-Hawaii News so the continuity would be kept.

KT: In terms of community, having lived on the East Coast where you worked on various types of communities and living out here in Hawai'i where there's really--I guess maybe also has a multi-ethnic community--but out here, how do you find the community? You said, number one, that people were fairly open in terms of welcoming you in. Are there any comments on community that . . .

HJ: Yes, I have a number of impressions. After sitting in on Afro-American Association meetings, I tried to calibrate where the people were politically. And from using my own experience as a calibrator, I came up with the year 1930. (KT laughs.) I felt that that was the level of thinking and I tried to explore why that was. And I think---because it appeared to me they had not experienced the struggles of the '40s and the '60s that had taken place on the Mainland. And as I looked at it from a sociological viewpoint, I realized that what we have is a kind of insularity that is due to an island existence so that the population as a whole is sort of buffered against the impact of the political and social trends that take place on the Mainland. And it was almost, even though Hawai'i is a part of the United States, unfortunately--I believe in

self-determination and say that advisedly--it did not reflect the social and political outlooks that had been formulated on the Mainland as a result of struggles. Of course, you had the struggle of the plantation workers. But the Black community was not very much a part of that, so that the trade union consciousness that permeates the Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese communities and to some extent the Hawaiian community, is not at the same level. Most of the Afro-Americans appear to me to be individual entrepreneurs or professionals with what E. Franklin Fraser called a bourgeois outlook.

Another factor that I think accounted for it is that a large number of those who settled here came out of the military which has a conservative impact on one's thinking. The disciplinary regime of the army and navy and marines is not conducive to creative thinking and free political expression, especially of the liberal or radical nature. And a lot of the veterans who are released even though they might be militant in their response to segregation and other things, generally have a conservative outlook on those questions that transcend the race question. So that I realized [by] working with the association that I was not in the most advanced Black community.

KT: We're going to turn this tape over.

HJ: Yes.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: Okay, we'll continue now.

HJ: There are two kinds of insularity. There's the insularity of an island people with the ocean acting as a buffer. And then there's the insularity of people who have been socialized into the military and insulated against participation in the civilian world. So it's kind of a double dip of insularity. And what is remarkable to me is that this group in the [Afro-American] Association, despite this background, is coming out with a forward-looking effort to make the Black presence visible so that it seems almost as if secretly and by osmosis, some of the perspectives of the '40s and '60s is coming through though in a slightly different way than in the Black communities on the Mainland.

Just an interesting analogy. I went to one of the state parks that has a number of plant and flower exhibits and the tour guide was telling us how many plants that are foreign that finally take root in Hawai'i sometimes adapt so well that they threaten and endanger the native Hawaiian plants, and some of them take on characteristics of the Hawaiian plants in their adaptation. Like there's one cactus plant that when it becomes indigenous here, gradually loses its

thorns and spines. (KT laughs.) So, you know, it becomes a friendly cactus. I analogize to the Black community that this same kind of, there's a kind of parallelism in this process. In the Black community, where you find that among the Blacks there's a kind of aloha spirit and [they're] not quite as militant and spiney as on the Mainland. There's a kind of softening affect that takes place that sometimes accentuates the conservatism.

KT: Have you made . . .

HJ: Many Blacks, for example, have told me that you have to be careful how you do things here. And they say, one thing, we say, you don't talk stink. And that's very big among the Japanese. And the Japanese have this kind of inscrutability. And I notice that many of the Blacks have taken on Japanese ways and have learned how not to give vent to their emotions . . .

KT: Acculturation.

HJ: Acculturation. (KT laughs.) And I don't know whether that's negative or positive. I haven't come up with a conclusion on that. There's probably something of both, positive and negative in that.

(Telephone rings.)

KT: We'll stop for a minute.

HJ: [Yes.]

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: We'll continue. Have you made any trips back to the Mainland since you have moved here and if so, what kinds of comparisons can you make in going back there and then having this to compare to that?

HJ: Well, I've been back five times since August '86. And I must say that every time I return to Hawai'i, I've felt like I was coming back home. So that even though I'm a New Yorker, who lived in New York from 1933 until 1986. . . .

KT: Keep talking.

HJ: Yeah. I really discovered that I've gotten to love Hawai'i and the atmosphere.

KT: Thank you very much. We'll end this interview now.

END OF INTERVIEW

Oral Histories of African Americans

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

December 1990