John Lee Johnson

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

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Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler

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Patrick Tyler: Okay, Mr. Johnson. Could you tell us your birth date and your birthplace?

John Lee Johnson: I was born August 7, 1941, in Champaign, Illinois.

Tyler: Could you tell us about some of your childhood experiences growing up here in Champaign?

Johnson: Well my experiences were limited. I come from a very large family. We were poor. My play area was the neighborhood in which I grew up in and we played on the railroad tracks, we played in the Bone Yard, we played on the streets, we played at Douglass Center Park, the old park. I think looking back historically, I feel my childhood experiences were typical for every kid in the neighborhood. We didn't have bicycles, we didn't have wagons and all those things, but we made those things. And I feel that my childhood experiences were positive. I enjoyed growing up in northeast Champaign.

Tyler: Could you tell us the schools that you attended?

Johnson: I went to Willard Elementary School, which is still standing; Lawhead School, which is demolished; Champaign Junior High School; Champaign Senior High School; Urbana High School; and Edison High School, which was Champaign Senior High then it became Edison.

Tyler: Could you share some of the experiences you encountered going to school?

Johnson: Well, first through sixth in Champaign at the time that I went to school was segregated. So Lawhead was a neighborhood segregated school only for black kids. Willard School was what — Lawhead was the first through I think fifth and Willard was sixth. Willard School was an all-black school, and when I left Willard School I went to Champaign Junior High, which is now Champaign Central and that was the first integrated school that I had went to. I didn't notice a great difference, because the problems in the community and the problems in the country at that time were completely different than they are now. So I would say that the only difference between the elementary school that I went to was that the buildings wasn't new, but other than that, you didn't notice anything any different.

When I got to Champaign Junior High School, I was just at junior high school. Although junior high school was integrated as opposed to being in segregated school facilities, I wasn't really conscious of it. I didn't look around and say, oh my God they're white kids here. And we didn't have this animosity. I mean, nobody was calling me nigger down the hallway; no one was playing practical jokes on us because we were black kids. So going into junior high school was a natural process to me. Now I think it is questionable as to the quality of education that I received in first through sixth. I don't think that's questionable because the school was segregated or because they were old

neighborhood buildings. It could've been that I was a kid who felt — in retrospect, I'm looking back not making a judgment then — that possibly that the educational experiences that I should've gotten could've been more positive. But I'm looking back now saying that and I don't think that at the time that I was making these experiences, these judgments would be made by me at that time.

Tyler: Could you tell us a little about your family and their background?

Johnson: I come from a large family. I had a mother and a father, a grandmother and a grandfather and six sisters and seven brothers. I believe my mom came from Mississippi, Greenville, Mississippi, and she arrived here in Champaign in 1927. My father came from Ohio, and he came here in '18, late '90s, 1898 or '99. It was both of their second marriages. My father got divorced right after the first World War. My mother was divorced in Mississippi. She was married, I think, at 14, her first marriage, and later on she met my father and married him.

My dad and his family were prominent people in the Champaign-Urbana area. His brother was a welterweight champion prizefighter in the country. There were musicians. His sister was a local politician and all of that. My dad owned a used car lot and several pieces of property in downtown Champaign. Of course, all of it was lost during the divorce.

Upon marrying my mother, he worked at a local bakery up until he died. We lived at 201 East Columbia in Champaign. That's the house that I was born

in. I think when I was sixteen we moved to Urbana — 1409 West Dublin. It was just typically a large family, struggling every day to have something to eat, you know, playing, carrying out the responsibilities of children. I think that although we were extremely poor, I look back on my childhood, particularly within my family, with a great deal of fondness. I had a lot of fun. I have nothing but positive remembrance from that childhood, but you know, we were a lot of kids in a two-bedroom house, with a father who worked from four o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night. And a mother who delivered most of the children at home as opposed to the hospitals, but other than that, the whole family structures of the communities were a lot different then as they are now. You could rely on people to assist you in those days, where you cannot rely so much on that now. I think there was more feelings of brotherhood and friendship back in the early forties than there exists today. So, even though we were extremely poor, there were other things that supported the family that do not exist today.

Tyler: Could you give us your parents' names?

Johnson: Mamie Carr Johnson. Thomas Deluxe Johnson. Carr is her maiden name.

Tyler: Okay. And also can you give us your brothers' and sisters' names?

Johnson: George, Vivian, Gertrude, Louie, Fannie Mae, Charlie, John Lee, Tommy, Larry, William, Carolyn, Betty, Ann Marie.

Tyler: What year did you graduate?

Johnson: I never graduated from high school. There was a mix-up, an administrative mix-up. When we moved from Champaign to Urbana, I had civics at Champaign Junior High School and when I got to Urbana High School, they told me that I was supposed to have civics there. I took civics. While in the process of being in high school, I was arrested. I was placed in jail and I was kicked out of my algebra class. And at the end of that year, graduation year, I was told I duplicated a course and eventually I became a half-credit short. Now, in my opinion that was the fault of the administration, and not my fault, because I was assigned civics by my counselor and my counselor had my records in front of him, and he should've known that I had civics in the Champaign school system. So as a result of that, I did not get a high school diploma.

Tyler: Can you tell us your first job that you had here in Champaign?

Johnson: My first job?

Tyler: Yeah your first job.

Johnson: I think at Curry's Restaurant. I was a dishwasher. That's in Urbana over by the courthouse on Main and Broadway, I believe. It's now an office building, and I worked there in the basement for what — a couple of months, washing dishes. Then I think I left there and went to the U of I drug store and I worked there for several years as a dishwasher, busboy also.

Generally I've done laboring, all kinds of different things in the community. Although the kinds of jobs are limited in this kind of community to black people — because this is not a highly industrial community — this is basically an educational service-oriented community. And so either you are working either in government, whether it be municipal, county or state government, or you're working in a service area. That means you are working in the kitchen for somebody or you're doing something in the service field. And the technical or craft positions which are here are basically controlled by unions, and those unions are controlled to, I think, discriminatory practices. Therefore, the opportunities for young black kids even in my day to do craft or technical kind of work was simply not available to us.

Tyler: What are some of the recent jobs that you have held?

Johnson: Well, I've been director of the Community Advocacy Depot, an agency which I founded, which was an environmental land use design agency. I've served as a maintenance of right-of-way, which is no more than a track man, for the Illinois Gulf Central Railroad. I've served in government as an elected official.

I've worked for the Department of Mental Health as an expert in the training of utilization of what I call indigenous experts in community mental health. I'm still a social advocate in preparation and providing low-income housing for people. Now I make a distinction between jobs in which one gets paid for, and jobs which one does simply because the need is there. I think that I'm unique in that there are very few people in Champaign County, black or white, which has the same kind of distinction in this county that I have. Which is, there's a high degree of rank of name recognition attached to me. So the moment that one hears my name, then job opportunities are not available to me.

Now to some people that's difficult to understand, but to the people who are cognizant of the historical social ills of not only our county and our community and our country, it's understandable. And that is, I happen to be black, I happen not to be 'the typical kind of Afro-American' and therefore white people just ain't concerned about providing me jobs to support me in confronting them. So you either do two things, and that is: You go to work for white people and do what white people want you to do or you don't necessarily work for white people, you do what you think you must do. The majority of what I've done over my life is those things I feel which must be done, and not those things I've done simply because I've had someone else supporting me to do them. But I've worked everyday of my adult life.

Tyler: Could you tell us about your organizations that you served on in the political realm? The names of them and what exactly that you went out to accomplish?

Johnson: Well, I've never been one for sitting on or joining things. I've always had a strange feeling about involving myself in something in which I had to be subservient to other people's interpretations and other people's, you know, projections of their knowledge of certain circumstances. Therefore, I think I classify myself as a doer and most of everything I've been involved in have been things that I've created. Although, initially I started in the late fifties by myself and I think immediately within '59, '60 — I and a friend of mine, Roy Williams — we were at that time trying to address the problems of gang violence, gangs in the Champaign-Urbana area. We organized what I called the Northeast Champaign Youth Movement, which consisted of all the gangs in the Champaign-Urbana area.

We went from there to organizing the People's Poverty Board in the early '60s, which principally was concerned about the [inaudible] Poverty Program or the lack thereof, the lack of participatory involvement on the parts of citizens in making decisions as to what the policies of local cap agencies of the community action agency ought to be, the direction of the corporation of those funds, and those things. That lead me to joining the Council for Community Integration. I didn't think I would join the Council for Community Integration, but the Council for Community Integration joined with the People's Poverty Board to confronting the

Champaign-Urbana Schools to initiate the first school integration program in downstate Illinois.

I went from there to hundreds: Northeast Champaign Productive Housing Development Corporation, to the Concerned Citizens Interfaith Non-proper Housing Corporation, to the Northeast Champaign Cultural Technical Institute, the Northeast Champaign — what was it — to the Neighborhood Youth Design Depot, the Afro-American Consolidated Contractor's Association, the Community Advocacy Depot. There were literally hundreds of organizations and splinter organizations which I got involved in.

I was criticized. I do remember criticism from people on the so-called periphery of all the organizations that John Lee Johnson had created. My response to people concerning that criticism was that, unlike white people, the moment that you begin to analyze a problem facing black people you found three other problems. And the moment that you solve those problems you found six other problems and you realize that with each new problem that you uncovered, there is simply no resource — no entity there to deal with that problem. And if that problem was to be addressed then those resources have to be developed locally.

We were then — we are now a nation that is poorly educated, a nation that is poorly trained, a nation that is poorly housed, a nation that is poorly governed and a nation that has yet to learn how to interact with ourselves. And we are race of people who — and I mean a race of people, not necessarily a nation. All these problems involve more than just simply black people, but they

are acute among our people. And so, if you are going to be concerned about the problems of black people, it's not nearly the issues of economics, because you have to come to the grips and realize that although we are entitled to all the rights economically as everybody else is entitled to, you realize that those rights don't mean anything if you are not prepared to assume them once they're given to you. You know, you fought years to get union doors open and once the union doors got open you realize that the brothers were not trained even to be apprentices, because apprenticeship programs were requiring the equivalent to, you know, college entry level requirements, that you have to have a minimum of one year of geometry in order to be a carpenter, electrician or a plumber. So even though initially in the sixties apprenticeship programs was not even open to black people and once you've gotten those doors open you realize very quickly that our people wasn't trained — and was not even qualified to go into the door once you got the doors open. So those require, those kinds of realizations require different avenues, different kinds of approaches and so every time I encountered a problem in which there was no solution for it, I tried to create a solution for it. So hence, you know, John Lee Johnson's life was with hundreds or organizations. That was always my answer to those people who criticized all the organizations that I had. I belonged to so many organizations that I don't even know what they were myself.

Tyler: What improvements would you like to see in the community in the future?

Johnson: Well, I've been struggling for the last twenty years to try to bring about a positive physical change in the community. Now, this positive physical change that I'm referring to is all encompassing. That is, that the change can not occur until black people are actively involved in participating in the political structures of the community. Once that begins to occur, then I think we'll begin to see great positive changes in the educational units of the Twin Cities. You'll begin to see great changes in the neighborhood or environmental structures of the community which black people are living in. But I've been doing that in the manner only in which the availability of opportunities have been afforded to me. So what am I saying? I'm saying that historically how certain things have been able to be achieved, they've been able to be achieved through the inner-connecting relationship between local government, state and federal government. The reliability of resources to deal with substandard housing and trying to get black people locally to a level that they're not fearful of urban renewal, that they will use urban renewal as a positive tool to change a community.

For many years we fought urban renewal, and we fought urban renewal because of how white people used urban renewal. Now that didn't mean and it still doesn't mean that urban renewal is not a positive program. What it means is that the people who have historically administered those programs never had your interest at heart. And what we've done, and what we are doing, we are running from the programs instead of trying to understand the program and use the programs to our, to the best of our abilities.

So throughout the last twenty some odd years, I've been dealing like that from urban renewal to neighborhood development, from neighborhood development, to community development, to urban development action grant program, to 236 housing mortgage program 221 B-3, to F.H.A., to H.U.D., you name it, to urban renewal departments, to community development divisions, to city managers, to mayors, to city council persons and to actual people who are affected by substandard conditions themselves.

So when I'm talking about the kinds of improvements that I want to see in the community, that the first level of improvement has to begin with heightening the ability of our people to understand. I think that we have examples if not in Champaign-Urbana, we clearly have examples in other places in the country, where the improvements of the environment where there has been no educational uplifting will result in a destruction of that environment at some point by the inhabitants. So the only way to guarantee a maintenance of the environment is to increase the level of understanding of the people who reside in it, and this is where I'm still falling short. I think that this is my hope for at least the Champaign-Urbana area, that the improvement of our neighborhoods can begin with a greater uplifting of the people who live there.

Tyler: How was it here in Champaign-Urbana doing the Civil Rights Movement?

Johnson: I think it was no different than it was in Chicago or any other place, except the numbers of people were less. We were busy confronting all the

problems and in some cases, I think that we were confronting problems that a lot of minority people were not confronting on the national level. As I indicated to you, in the late fifties, early sixties, that we were concerned about education, we were concerned about the quality of neighborhood, we were concerned about economic opportunities. Now these were, in fact, policies or even issues that were confronted by a lot of people, but it had not came to the forefront.

Of course, we didn't have the transportation problems. We were not forced to sit at the back of the bus. There was no one door that we had to use to go into a theatre, and there was no black water fountain and a white water fountain. And so a lot of people in the late fifties and early sixties were fighting certain kinds of basic human rights issues that we were not fighting here. There was still the issues of fair housing — it was a issue. We were not talking about fair housing as it related to living outside of the black community. We were talking about fair housing as it related to our neighborhood and increasing the quality of housing within that neighborhood. Now ultimately the city of Champaign and Urbana did adopt the Fair Housing Program. That program is in existence today, but as you know the value of it depends upon the economic level that you're at. If you can't afford to move somewhere the program doesn't mean anything, so that's what we were.

Tyler: How was crime when you first came, when you were coming up?

Johnson: Crime was not a major issue. When I came up in the fifties, everyone knew each other and I think what we had in our community and what we had in our country is that we still had a high level of human respect for each other. And there was drugs, but drugs were only used by a very small group of people, and it was not something that was used by everyone. I mean, the biggest crime when I grew up was for kids to smoke a cigarette. So you didn't have kids that were sneaking off drinking booze. You didn't have kids that was getting involved in other kinds of drugs. You didn't have a lot of the factors which a crime produces.

And then you had a major separation of adults and young people in my generation, so although there may had been domestic violence, but young people didn't know it because we had a separation of adults and youngsters. For today we have an integration of children and adults, and therefore, children are able to see what adults are doing and many of the crimes that are committed by adults are therefore committed by children, but in my day that didn't happen because we weren't allowed around adults. I mean, I came up under: You are to be seen, and not heard.

Tyler: How about . . . What's the difference between the youth of your day and the youth of today?

Johnson: I think that youth of my day is that — we did not have the vast technical communication systems which exist today, existing in my day. We did

not have rapid flow of information. What we had was the radio and the technical form of communication that existed outside of our family was the radio. We listened to the radio. Here the children have television. Movies were something special to us. Movies were not something that was readily available to us. Children were more conscious of the things that we had, simply because we were knowledgeable of what we did not have. Things did not come easy. Things became very difficult for us, therefore, it increased our respect for them once we got them. We had a stronger responsibility to support our family than children have today. Everybody had something to do when I was a kid. When I came home I had to chop wood, get in coal, bring in water. Kids don't have to do that now. I grew up having to clean out the stove, making the fire, making sure that the fire — the house was warm in the morning and the house was warm when everyone went to bed.

I had the responsibility of pulling out the washer machine, boiling water, sorting clothes, washing the clothes. There were — something for everyone to do. Today children do not have that form of responsibility. You can see that the life of a child is committed to play, where when I was a kid my life was not committed to play. You don't find a strong parental control over children. When I was a kid I could not go outside of my mother's eye, and if I was playing, if I was out of her eye, I had to be within the sound of her ear. Now children are allowed to go anywhere and half the parents have no idea where their children are, who they're playing with, what they're doing or anything. Our parents controlled us. Our older brothers and sisters acted as an extension of our parents.

Today nobody is controlling young people. Young people are raising themselves. And I think and, we're seeing within our society the, you know, the end products of that — the violence, the drug addiction, the alcoholism, the lack of education, the despair, the lack of hope — all of these things are a product of the breakdown of the inability of parents to rear their children. And, of course, there are a lot of young parents today as opposed to when I was a kid. You didn't find a lot of young ladies 15,16 years old married or with several children living outside their home on public aid. Those kinds of things did not exist in the fifties. So the opportunities for children to escape parental responsibility, the opportunities for children to escape an education — the responsibility is easier today then it was when let's say I was 15 years old.

Tyler: How about the church? What part has the church played in the community in the past?

Johnson: Well, the church has played a variety of roles in the history of this community and the history of this country. I think the church has played a stabilizing role, historically in our community, and yet the church has not been a force for social change. The church has not been in the leadership of confronting problems of illiteracy, problems of economics, the problems of housing, the need for all kinds of social economic revitalization in the Champaign-Urbana area — the church has not been up front. We think of Dr. King and Adam Clayton Powell, but we forget that these men were exceptions, they were not the rule.

And therefore, the black church as a rule has never served as an advocate of political or social change, but yet it has met an acute human need.

And despite the anxiety and the frustration, the church has served to quell that, but it has not served to direct it positively. I mean, if you go back and look at the early American church, pre-1776 and the early 1730s, 1740s, the church was serving as a basis for which the early settlers came together to discuss revolution, see. Where the black church has not been a basis for social discussion, political thought. I think that one of the important things about the election of Mayor Washington in Chicago is that the black churches did come together and served as a unified force to help get Mr. Washington elected mayor of Chicago, but the black churches have failed historically to come together to serve as a unified force to help improve the condition of black people historically in Champaign-Urbana. Now there could be reasons for that because the church is after all, people, you know. And it could be that the interest of the minister, the interest of the congregations have not been those things, and it could be how people read the Bible or how they do not read the Bible or at least their interpretations from either one — the lack of reading it or from reading it.

Tyler: I have no more questions, but if there is anything you'd like to say?

Johnson: No, go on with your questions.

Tyler: I have no more.

Johnson: There's no more questions? Oh! Well I think that if we are to survive — one as a race, two as a nation — our survival shall depend upon the ability of black people. One, to understand their responsibilities and two, to live up to the commitment that that responsibility demands of us. I think our greatest problem is that we have no appreciation of our history, and by not having any appreciation of our history we have no understanding of our presence and then we have no expectations for the future. It's important that successful nations are nations who do in fact record their history, who do in fact teach it, who do in fact [inaudible] an interpretation analysis of current events based on that history and who are able to project a direction of their race from all of those things. We don't do that. Our history tells me that we should be the most concerned race in America about one, our right and the fulfillment of that right to register ourselves to vote, to participate at all levels of political government, to confront wickedness wherever we find it, to confront bigotry wherever we find it, to insist for those opportunities that are afforded to us that we take advantage of them, and when we take advantage of them that we do everything we can to expose the hardships that has historically and presently been placed in our people, and that we force, we force young people today to assume a responsibility.

The biggest problem that we have in America today is that we have not been freed in the sense that all of the historical evils of being black in this country have dissipated. You've been given the right to decide certain things. You've been given the right to decide, that I'm not going to that meeting, I'm going to

watch television or I'm going to play basketball or I'm not going to take — who wants to take civics, who wants to take chemistry, when I can take family living. Who wants to take trigonometry, when I can take bookkeeping one. Who would want to go to school, when I'm 18 I can stay out in the park and smoke cigarettes. These are rights in which we have to say to people you don't have the right to exercise. Either you are going to do something that's going to improve yourself, improve your race or you know, get out of it. So its been — people are talking about the failures of the American educational system. The American educational system is failing for inner city blacks and rural poor whites, because the counselors in our school systems have allowed us to select courses to make us obsolete, not courses to make us competitive. Why is it that only poor people are given the right to select courses which will not send them to college?

If you are white and middle class then that curriculum is already laid out for you. You're going to take trigonometry. You're going to take algebra. You're going to take it whether you want to take it or not, because those parents know that without those courses there is no options available to you. But a counselor will say to a black kid in a minute, well, you don't need that. Why don't you just take bookkeeping one. That'll do you. Because they know that the parent upon seeing that report card don't know the difference between bookkeeping one and algebra. They don't have the ability to look forward. Now we don't have in our community the kinds of systems in which we are helping each other.

I mean, a kid who is able to read well is not saying to his peers who are not able to read well, come by my house, and I'll help you to read or why don't you come over and we'll do algebra together, because I can hang with algebra but I have problem with social studies. We're not doing these things, so as a result of that there's a few of us who are becoming educated and the masses of us are standing still. And I think the few of us are going to realize that if we are not all educated, and if we are not all able to function, then America won't survive.

You simply cannot take 22 million people out of your culture and simply wipe them out, and this is what has occurred and this is what is occurring. We're going to have to assume responsibilities for ourselves. And if we don't start going that very soon then we are going to be out of the ball game, because I think everybody else in the world is waking up and everybody else in the world is realizing that it is a massive, competitive world. And it's no longer simply someone respecting you because you're black or because you're Puerto Rican or because you're Russian or Chinese, it is being able to compete to survive, being able to compete to have a house, being able to compete to have a car, being able to compete to have a job, but not so much competing with your fellow citizens but competing in the world.

I think the example of that is the inability of our nation to compete with the Japanese, to compete with the Germans. Now when everybody else begins to reach a technical level and our country is staying stagnate or our race of people is stagnate, then that means that you're gonna see a whole occupational field

existing in the nineties that black people will not be able to do. I mean, if everybody will be working with computers by 1985, then I mean our people won't be working because our people cannot articulate math, you see. Our people don't type. See what I'm saying? So that means that the average black kid that you see in your public schools, you can say that one out of ten is going to make it. I mean just walk down and say man what you talking this year? Let me see what you got. Look at his books. Look at his books and that will tell you where he's going to be ten years from now.

So I mean we're being X'd out of it, and the only way to X ourselves back in it is not arguing with the board of education, because the board of education ultimately didn't stop you from telling a counselor I don't want that course, I'm going to take this course. So we have acquiesced to our own slavery, not knowingly, so the only way we are going to get back in it is that we have to begin to assume responsibility that we have not been prepared for.

That means that school will not become an 8-to-3 situation for us — that we must go to school fifteen hours a day, we must go to school seven days a week, we must go to school 365 days a year. There will be no off days for us. Everything that we do has to be done for sake of learning, not for the sake of entertainment.

Now the question is, is that are black people prepared to assume that? That's a question right now I would say no, because we're too hung up in getting material things now instead of looking at the long run. I mean, there is 33,000 kids out here and go count how many of these 33,000 kids are black. I mean,

this is not atypical institution, this is a typical university. You look around you. There are more foreign students here than there are Afro-American students, and yet the Afro-American mothers and fathers are paying for this university. So here we have a major university here in Champaign-Urbana and historically very few of us ever took an advantage of it, so as for as northeast Champaign-Urbana is concerned, this _____ place, soon not be here.

I mean Parkland College — if you go out to Parkland College there has been a increase in the numbers of black kids who are at Parkland, but they don't even know what Parkland is there for. You go out there and stand around the rec room or the lounge room and this is a joke. It's a joke. So what they are doing is that they're saying, Okay well, the kids have got to be here because they're paying their money, but let's keep them over in a corner so they won't bother anybody who's trying to get a education. Because here again black kids got a misunderstanding as to what they're there for. We don't have to walk around with combs in our hair. The more we walk in the room, a white man is going notice us. We don't have to walk down the street with big shoes, record players booming in the sky. Anywhere you go in this country and as long as you stay black you will be noticed. So you don't have to talk loud. You don't have to giggle. You don't have to do a damn thing. If you're in that room, that white man will know you're there. So we have been placing too long our emphasis in the wrong direction. So when you go into a school system and if the rules are that a black kid can wear his hat, but the white kids can't, that tells you something's wrong there. A black kids can walk around with a comb in his head and white

kids can't. That tells you something is wrong, see. I mean you know, the concerns are all wrong. And now we have the major problem with half of our kids are going to school all drugged out. Every kid now in order to be cool has a pocketful of marijuana sticks.

Of course, young black kids are not concerned about the studies which are showing that you know, massive use of marijuana is affecting the memory systems of people. Kids are unable to concentrate who are heavy users of marijuana and all these associate problems, and then you got the other problems of all kinds of school crime which is related to the high use of drugs. So there are massive problems and the future for the next generation of black people is in fact worse than the future of your mother and father. Your parents and our parents had a better future than you got, and they came up under a stricter, racist, segregated system than you did. Even though they were being affected by racism, the other corrupting factors within the social finders that race did not exist — so their chance of surviving is far better than yours.

[End of the Tape and Interview.]