

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert C. Johnson, Jr.

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Johnson, Robert, Jr.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 7, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:38:37).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Playwright, africana studies professor, and lawyer Robert C. Johnson, Jr. (1948 - ) has written several books and plays documenting the experience of the African diaspora as well as advocating for social change for African Americans. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 7, 2006, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_068
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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

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

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

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

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## Scope and Content

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

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

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

### Restrictions on Use

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

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## Related Material

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

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Johnson, Robert, Jr.

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Robert, Jr.--Interviews

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

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

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

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Africana Studies Professor

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Lawyer

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Playwright

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers|EducationMakers|LawMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

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

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., April 7, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:06 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr., attorney, professor and playwright, describes his family background and early childhood. His mother, domestic worker Dorothy Louise Burgan Guyton, was born in 1920 in Spartanburg, South Carolina to the Reverend Nathan and Hannah Burgan. His father, Robert Cecil Johnson, Sr., was born in Ooltewah, Tennessee in 1921 to John and Icie Johnson. Johnson's father, who was of mixed black and Cherokee ancestry, died when Johnson was four years old. Johnson was born on May 13, 1948 in Summit, Tennessee, a poor community with a Klu Klux Klan presence. In 1961, at the age of thirteen, Johnson moved to Boston, Massachusetts with his mother. The move was difficult for Johnson who missed the South and his maternal grandparents. Greater opportunities in Boston allowed his mother to attend a hair dressing school and open a beauty shop with his aunt. He describes his mother's role in Boston's Holy Tabernacle Church and her healing ability. He also talks about his extended family's annual reunions.

African American families--Tennessee.

African American grandparents--Tennessee.

African Americans--Migrations--United States--20th century.

African American families--Massachusetts--Boston.

African Americans--Religion--United States.

Ku Klux Klan (1915)--Tennessee.

African American churches--Massachusetts--Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. has researched both his parents' family backgrounds extensively, attempting to trace his mother's, family, the Burgans, to a plantation in Buncombe County, North Carolina and finding his paternal grandmother's family name, Clay, in a set of Cherokee scrolls at New Echota, Georgia. In fourth grade, Johnson moved from Summit, Tennessee to Boston, Massachusetts where he attended Dwight School and Charles E. Mackey School before enrolling at the English High School of Boston. Interested in science, Johnson formed a study group with his peers, one of whom he later found in a prison convicted of killing his wife. Around the eighth grade, Johnson became involved at the South End House, which was directed by HistoryMaker Melvin King. King later helped enroll him in A Better Chance program which allowed Johnson to transfer to the Commonwealth School, a private school in Boston where he received a better education. He recalls moving to Boston's Orchard Park projects with his mother.

African American students--Education (Primary)--Tennessee.

African American students--Education (Elementary)--Massachusetts--Boston.

African American students--Education (Secondary)--Massachusetts--Boston.

Discrimination in education--Massachusetts--Boston.

Commonwealth School (Boston, Mass.)--Students.

Merrill, Charles, 1920-.

King, Mel.

South End House (Boston, Mass.).

Academic achievement--Massachusetts--Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. completed high school at the Commonwealth School in Boston, Massachusetts through A Better Chance and under the mentorship of his future father-in-law Charles E. Merrill, Jr. In high school, he wrote his first play, 'Coffee and Sour Cream,' and formed the Teenage Action Group with his peers, one of whom was beaten by police during riots after Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 assassination. In 1967, Johnson entered Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, majoring in Africana Studies and participating in protests to increase the number of black students there. After graduating in 1971, he received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to travel to East Africa for one year. Johnson then began a joint J.D. and M.A. degree program at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York with the intention of returning to Africa. In New York, he developed a prison program at Auburn Prison, and worked under W. Haywood Burns and HistoryMaker Howard Moore, Jr. on the 1971 Attica Prison rioters' legal defense.

African American students--Education (Secondary)--Massachusetts--Boston.

Commonwealth School (Boston, Mass.)--Students.

African American students--Education (Higher)--Maine--Brunswick.

Bowdoin College--Students--Political activity--20th century.

African American college students--Political activity--Maine--Brunswick.

Merrill, Charles, 1920-.

African American families.

American drama--African American authors.

Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Program.

Civil rights movements--United States--20th century.

African Americans--Africa, East.

Immigrants--Africa, East.

Cornell Law School--Students--Political activity--20th century.

African American law students--Political activity--New York (State)--Ithaca--20th century.

Auburn Correctional Facility.

Prison riots--New York (State)--Attica.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:18 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. received his J.D. degree from Cornell Law School in Ithaca, New York in 1977. He then worked for the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges as an affirmative action officer. In 1978, Johnson transferred to the same position at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and then taught business law for two years at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. During the 1980s, he practiced employment and criminal defense law with partner HistoryMaker Eddie Jenkins, Jr. Johnson reduced his hours after a heart attack circa 1992. He also ran for Massachusetts State Representative against Thomas M. Finneran and worked with the Harriet Tubman House, the Citizens' Advisory Committee, and HistoryMaker Charles

"Chuck" Turner's Black United Front. In 1991, his mentally-ill son Gary Weldon Johnson and he were arrested, inspiring him to write 'Stop and Frisk.' He talks about his other plays, his photography, auto restoration, and about his vacations in Vermont and Treasure Beach, Jamaica.

African American lawyers--Massachusetts--Boston.

Affirmative action programs--Massachusetts--Boston.

Community colleges--Employees--Massachusetts--Boston.

University of Massachusetts at Boston--Employees.

African American dramatists--Massachusetts--Boston.

American drama--African American authors.

Police misconduct--Massachusetts--Boston.

Racial profiling in law enforcement--Massachusetts--Boston.

Boston (Mass.) Police Dept.

American Association for Affirmative Action.

Social work with African Americans--Massachusetts--Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:07 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. has taught full-time in the University of Massachusetts-Boston's Africana Studies department since 1993, alongside distinguished scholars like HistoryMaker Jemadari Kamara and Chukwuma Azuonye. Throughout his career, he published several texts on Africana Studies, including 'Shona,' 'Why Blacks Left America for Africa,' 'Race, Law and Public Policy,' 'Returning Home: a Century of African-American Repatriation,' 'Fighting for Africa,' and 'Nantucket's People of Color.' His work for social justice includes his advocacy for Ndume Olatushani's exoneration in Tennessee and his service alongside HistoryMakers Charles Willie and Iva Carruthers on the planning committee for The HistoryMakers. He is married to white playwright Amy Merrill. He concludes by reflecting upon his life, including his mother's death, his religiosity, and his history of womanizing. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered.

African American college teachers--Massachusetts--Boston.

University of Massachusetts at Boston--Faculty.

African American painters--Tennessee.

African American prisoners--Tennessee.

Judicial error--Tennessee.

Interracial marriage--Social aspects.

Mothers and sons--Drama.

African American mothers--Death.

Divorce.

African Americans--Conduct of life.

African Americans--Social conditions--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert C. Johnson, Jr., Section A2006\_068\_001\_006, TRT: 0:09:17 ?

Robert C. Johnson, Jr. narrates his personal photographs.