

## “Nobody Defines Us, We Define Ourselves”

Eziaku A. Nwokocha

E. Patrick Johnson's *Black. Queer. Southern. Women. An Oral History*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018

If you want to laugh, cry, be angry, get up from your seat to walk away, or grab your imaginary fan because the tea is too hot, then E. Patrick Johnson's *Black. Queer. Southern. Women. An Oral History* deserves your complete attention. The book offers an oral history of southern Black lesbians and their understanding of their own selfhood. Focusing on the interior lives of Black queer women, Johnson illustrates how the featured narrators embody and relay historical material about race, region, class, sexuality, and gender while showcasing the vital role of storytelling as a form of communication that illuminates same-sex desires, identity formation, and community building (5). This book stands firmly alongside its queer brethren, *Sweat Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Johnson 2008), emphatically asserting that Black queer women are not simply the mirror image of Black queer men but contain their own distinct and complex narratives. Their lived experiences are uniquely shaped by patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny. By centering Black queer women, Johnson has masterfully chronicled another exceptional set of oral histories, capturing the complexity of southern Black queer folks without falling into prevalent tropes that place singular focus on Black men and turn Black queer women into an afterthought.

*Black. Queer. Southern. Women* draws on Black women fiction and nonfiction writers, both heterosexual and queer, as a framework to consider the lived experiences of southern Black lesbians (7). Through contemporary oral history, readers grapple with the multiplicity of southern queer women and understand their realities through their self-depictions, contending with their worldviews in all their contradictions and complexities. What is most evident in Johnson's methodology is his attention to intimacy and care in his interviews. He applies a Black feminist approach that is self-reflexive

*WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 50: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2022) © 2022 by Eziaku A. Nwokocha. All rights reserved.

of his own privileges as a cisgender, effeminate Black gay man, recognizing that despite his personal politics, he still benefits from patriarchy and must reckon with how that impacts his communication with his interlocutors (9–10). Johnson applies a “male feminist praxis.” This requires him to consider the sense of ethics and moral obligation he owes the Black queer women he interviews by asking them to describe their feelings and attitudes rather than viewing them as objects with information one can extract and disseminate (11); he is deferential to their interpretations of their lives and feelings, wary of imposing his own biases onto their words. While interviewing and assembling the stories of over seventy Black queer women, Johnson draws from Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, calling himself an “insider/outsider” who recognizes that although he shares both queerness and southernness with his interviewees, their gender and possible class differences produce a unique point of view in relation to power and patriarchy.

Throughout the book, Johnson uses italicized comments to contextualize the narrators, relating their desires with all the complexities, ambivalences, and raunchiness they might entail. For example, he describes a woman named Priscilla who grew up in East Austin, Texas, in 1967, as having an “infectious laugh,” and explains that “underneath [her] gregarious personality is a fierce activist who is quite serious about the freedom of queer people of color,” (55). Guided by Priscilla’s story, he details the landscape of her hometown and relays the history of its Black population, once clustered in East Austin due to segregation but now withered as a result of ongoing gentrification (55). Johnson beautifully segues from the personal stories of individual interviewees into the histories of southern cities like Austin and New Orleans, and states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia, effortlessly articulating the importance of region in shaping the contours of Black women’s particular experiences. Johnson carefully lays out these stories, never allowing them to be easily pinned down as narratives of only pain or trauma, joy or laughter. The women he interviewed are too fascinating to be summed up simply. Their ages ranged from eighteen to seventy-nine and, over the course of over five hundred pages, Johnson captures a change over time in the ways Black women identified themselves, from “butch,” “dyke,” or “bulldagger,” to “femme,” “no-labels,” “studs,” and “androgynous.” He was clearly conscious of engaging a broad cross section of Black queer women, with interlocutors ranging in occupation: academics, athletes, bus and truck drivers, artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, and professionals provide

a range of distinct personalities, hopes, dreams, and loves that are captivating and sincere. Johnson incorporates discussions about health as well, such as the impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the Black community or the health issues related to mothering (441). Moreover, it is refreshing that Johnson writes about the mental and emotional exhaustion of undertaking these interviews for himself and the women he spoke with. Even as a reader, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women* can be an emotionally taxing endeavor, though well worth the effort.

*Black. Queer. Southern. Women* is divided into two parts containing thirteen chapters. Part one consisted of stories thematically centered on budding girlhood to adulthood, showcasing conversations about intimacy that focused on themes like segregation, gender nonconformity, sexual desires, religion, spirituality, motherhood, and activism. Part two features one woman per chapter, allowing a single narrative to unfold with great detail and complexity, encompassing many of the themes of the text in an individual tale. Within the first half of the book, one of the most notable chapters is five, where women candidly express their first sexual desires, exploring the ability to communicate their joy and pain in the midst of self-discovery. Johnson portrays the nostalgia wrapped up in memories of burgeoning queer desires, deftly navigating stories about first kisses and self-pleasure (216–23). Interestingly, in comparison to the men, Johnson interviewed in his previous book *Sweet Tea*, many of the women he interviewed did not “always know” they were attracted to women and at times spoke about queer sexual awakenings later in their lives, even after being intimate with and married to men (213). By engaging many different ages, the array of stories of self-discovery were compelling and diverse.

Johnson’s book does oral history the right way, addressing potentially sensitive subjects with respect and generosity. Because of this, he makes another commendable contribution to Black feminist studies, oral history, performance studies, queer studies, and Africana studies. Johnson ends by imploring readers to reflect on what Black feminist scholar Evelyn Hammonds wrote about the void at the center of scholarship about Black lesbians, an absence that could only be filled once their experiences were placed at the heart of discourses of race, sexuality, and gender (561). *Black. Queer. Southern. Women* addresses that void, employing oral history as a source of knowledge to combat the persistent erasure of Black, queer women’s histories and lived realities from academia and beyond.

**Eziaku A. Nwokocho** is a Presidential Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. In fall 2022, she will be an assistant professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Miami. Nwokocho is a scholar of Africana religions with expertise in the ethnographic study of Vodou in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, with research grounded in thorough understanding of religions in West and Central Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, in gender and sexuality studies, visual and material culture, and Africana Studies generally. Her book manuscript, *Vodou en Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the U.S.* is under an advance contract with UNC Press. She can be reached at [nwokocho@princeton.edu](mailto:nwokocho@princeton.edu).

Copyright of Women's Studies Quarterly is the property of Feminist Press at CUNY and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.