

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Steve Johnson

INCITE

Columbia University

2018

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Steve Johnson conducted by Whitney Dow on May 13, 2018. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC

Session #1

Interviewee: Steve Johnson

Location: Cheyenne, WY

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: May 13, 2018

Q: Okay, first of all, can you tell me your name, where you're from, and a little about yourself?

Johnson: [01:00:56] My name is Steve Johnson. I've lived in Cheyenne, [Wyoming] for sixty years out of sixty-five. I was born in Boise City, Oklahoma.

Q: And what brought you to Wyoming?

Johnson: [01:01:07] My parents.

Q: And was there a—did they come here for work? Did they come because they didn't like the community—

Johnson: [01:01:15] They came here for work. They knew that Cheyenne had better school systems than Oklahoma did. And my father was an avionics engineer. And right after World War II, all the flyboys from World War II wanted to fly planes and buy their own planes. And they needed radios to work. So Cheyenne was right in the middle of the country. And it was the place to be. They'd fly in and he'd work on their radios.

Q: And so tell me about growing up here. What was it like growing up here sixty years ago? Did you live in town? Did you live outside of town?

Johnson: [01:01:50] We lived in town. And it was a happy childhood. We had rain. We'd make dams in the gutters and float Popsicle sticks down. [Laughs]

Q: And what was the neighborhood like that you grew up in? Was it like a blue-collar, upper scale ? Was it a rich neighborhood? What was the neighborhood like?

Johnson: [01:02:12] It was middle class. It was all working fathers. Mothers didn't work. Mothers were always home. So that's really changed now.

Q: When you—I know that Sam's been staying with you for a while. What was your—what did you think when he first told you about what he was up to?

M1: Do you mind putting that water bottle on the floor? [Unclear]

Q: Okay.

M1: Yes, there you go. If you get thirsty, you can drink it.

Johnson: Okay.

Q: So when Sam told you about what he was up to, what was your response to this project? It's kind of a weird project in a way. And just was wondering what you thought about the idea of it.

Johnson: [01:02:54] We were glad to have him. We knew he was getting out of a bad situation that wasn't going to—and he's young enough in life he doesn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

Q: What was the bad situation?

Johnson: [01:03:04] He had a girlfriend that was a drug abuser and not working and—

Q: No, no, I was talking about Sam.

Johnson: [01:03:14] Sam who? Oh. The other Sam. Oh, not my Sam. Oh—

M1: [Laughter] Oh, your son's name is—

Johnson: [01:03:18] Oh, my son.

Q: I wasn't going to—

Johnson: [01:03:20] Oh, you don't know the whole story about Sam? [Laughs]

Q: [Unclear] This is new information we're getting about you, Sam. A bad situation. [Unclear]

Johnson: [01:03:32] I'm going to get him fired, huh?

Q: Yes. So I was interested in what you thought about—I think when he told you he was doing this project on whiteness in Wyoming, your thought—what did you think of—what your sort of thought about the idea of even doing a project like that.

Johnson: [01:03:49] I think it's great. I think there are so many misconceptions of race in America right now that—yes. You guys probably don't know what we think in Wyoming. So it's—

Q: That's exactly why we're here.

Johnson: [01:04:02] Yes.

Q: And so what do you think that people don't know—what are their misconceptions about Wyoming and how people view race here that you think that people misunderstand what's really going on out here?

Johnson: [01:04:15] I think Cheyenne is probably—we've been voted the most friendliest city in America. We take pride in being—smiling at everybody. You go down the road, you wave at

them. We acknowledge that they're alive and that they're—that—we just like living here. We're big family, big friends.

Q: And one of the reasons why we came here is we've been in Richmond, [Virginia], which has a big black population and a big white population, a very complicated history around—it was the seat of the Confederacy. We wanted to come to a place that was really—because historically it's been mostly white. Wyoming's one of the whitest states in the Union. And just wondering what—how do people view—when you say you're friendly, how do—what are some of the overall view on people of color that are—for people who are white and living up here?

Johnson: [01:05:14] Colorblind. If you're nice to me, I'll be nice to you. I mean, it's that simple. I don't—I accept people for what's inside of them. Not what—nothing else.

Q: Now, when you think of yourself, how would you describe yourself racially?

Johnson: [01:05:35] Racially? What do you mean? White, I guess.

Q: White, you guess. What is it that makes you white? Is it the skin color, the way your attitude, your—what is it—when you talk about a white person, what makes them white?

Johnson: [01:05:48] Skin color. I don't know how else you'd describe it. I mean, you can't add attributes to skin color. You're white because your skin's white. You're black because your skin's black. I mean, I don't know. [Laughs]

Q: And how often do you think about your own race?

Johnson: [01:06:11] Never. Doesn't make any difference to me.

Q: And can you put my questions into your answer a little bit?

Johnson: [01:06:18] What do I think about my race? I don't think anything about my race. It doesn't matter to me what color I am. It's what's inside.

Q: And why is it that you feel that you don't think about your race?

Johnson: [01:06:34] Because we all get along. I mean, what—I've got a job to do, and I've got things to do like most people do. And you go about your job. And what does that have to do with your job at hand? Race has no bearing on what you do in life.

Q: But you would admit that there's—throughout our history and even now that there's a lot of racial tension between white people and people of color. And I'm sure you see on the news—maybe not here in Wyoming, but other places. That it's not something that's insignificant. It's not something that doesn't affect people and affect their experience of the world.

Johnson: [01:07:14] Well, I think that's been brought about by Barack Obama and the Democratic Party. And they are the race—they're the racists. They're the people that keep that

racism ginned up [phonetic] that white people are holding them down or oppressing them and that the government will support them, will take care of them. And that's not true. We need to be colorblind. I think the Democratic Party needs those—they need to warehouse those voters. And that's what they're doing. That's what I believe.

Q: And so explain to me a little bit how it's being driven by the Democratic Party and how it would benefit them to keep the conflict between races going?

Johnson: [01:08:00] They just warehouse those voters. Those blacks in Chicago, [Illinois]—you hear about Black Lives Matter. They only show up at a Republican function or cause trouble there. If black lives matter, they'd be in Chicago. And they would be taking care of those—that's collateral damage. I don't know how many kids they've killed here just this weekend. Well, that's just collateral damage. But as long as the government gives them a stipend and allows them to live in squalor or whatever—if you have free housing, you're—they're not happy. You're not happy unless you build something yourself. At the end of the day, you have to have that sense of accomplishment for whatever job you've done. If you're just handed something, what accomplishment is that? No, you need to have self-esteem and know that you did something that day. I'm not just being handed something.

And if you hand them something, they expect something back. They want you to vote for the Democrats. That's the way I see it.

Q: And when you see those things—it sounds like you're someone who follows the news and stays informed. When you see the things like the events in Charlottesville or the riots in Baltimore, what does it make you think? How does that make you feel to see that there's these clashes between these groups?

Johnson: [01:09:26] I'm mad. I think the mayor in Baltimore; she caused more problems there and allowed those people to riot. Well, how is that helping the community? That destroyed homes and businesses of black people that were living there peacefully. They had nothing to do with it. But they wanted to make a big deal out of it and make it national news. And I don't know what their gain was, just to show them that there still is racism at some point in Baltimore. Well, that's their own fault. They brought it up. They flared it up. They threw gas on the fire. And that's what they got.

Q: And when you look at the numbers, it's pretty—I read a pretty startling statistic recently that the American blacks have a—American white families have an average net worth of about \$160,000. The average black only has an average net worth of about \$11,000. And that's a pretty intractable [unclear] distance between the economic conditions of the average white person—I'm not talking about everybody. But just on the whole. Is that something that's the result of some sort of racist structure? Or is it something that the black community's not doing? Why do you think that's such—I mean, for me it was a pretty startling statistic to see. Why do you think that that exists like that?

Johnson: [01:10:45] Let's start with the War on Poverty, where you're going to pay people—they actually ended up breaking up the family structure of the blacks, black families. Once you have—once you pay women to be single and be paid for every child that they have, there's no need for a father. There's no need for love in the family anymore. That's a paycheck. Well, I think that's extremely harmful to the black community. Once you're on welfare, you're not making—you don't have a job. You don't—you're dependent on the government for whatever they're going to give you. You're not dependent on yourself.

If they would teach—I don't know how else to say that. Teach them, tell them that you're responsible for your own life. Nobody else is going to help you out. I don't care what the government says. They might help you out a little bit. But ultimate responsibility is on you to take care of your life. If you don't like the way your life is going, there's two things you can do. You can change it or live with it. If you live with it, just shut the hell up and that's all you need to do. If you want to change your life, there's always a possibility.

Look at Ben Carson. He's incredible. He was brought up in a black family in a black ghetto neighborhood. Well, his mother taught him that you need to read. You're responsible for yourself. That's where the black community has gone wrong. There's a huge amount of black churches that are preaching that and saying the family is important. Once you've destroyed that family unit, you're going head-on into anarchy.

Q: But we could also agree that there is—historically, there's been a lot of inequities. There was slavery. There was Jim Crow. There was a lot of things. That stuff was in the past. Is that all now

just—is there any lasting effects from that? Or is that something that—you and me as two middle-aged white guys sitting here in 2018, are we connected to that? Or that’s not our responsibility [unclear]?

Johnson: [01:12:57] America paid an incredible price to end slavery in 1865. Six hundred fifty thousand deaths. We paid an incredible price to end that process. That was their era. They paid that price. They ended slavery. Why would I be responsible for something that happened 250 or 150 years ago? I didn’t have anything to do with it.

Q: It’s interesting. That’s the—you know, I’ve talked to a lot of people about this. That’s the first person I’ve actually ever heard talk about the deaths in the Civil War and connect that to the [unclear]

Johnson: [01:13:39] It was terrible carnage. It was awful. It was an awful—slavery was an awful establishment. It was terrible. And they paid the price for it.

Q: When you hear—what do you think that people who aren’t white misunderstand about white people or project onto white people that is inaccurate?

Johnson: [01:14:06] I don’t know. All the black people I know accept me as who I am. And we’re friends. I don’t know what they think of white people. I don’t know what I think of black people. If you’re nice to me, I’m nice to you. I’m not—don’t expect something out of me that

I'm not willing to give. And I don't expect something out of them that they're not willing to give.

Q: Did you—one of the things that we were interested in about coming here also is that because the state is so predominantly white—we come up here and certainly it's a beautiful country. It seems like, as you said, everybody is really open and friendly and nice. Why do you think that the state has stayed so persistently white? There's been—people move all around the country all the time. Why is it—what is it that's keeping this from becoming—I'll say this, our country's demographics are changing really rapidly. And so I would expect then that that would happen in most places. Why is it that Wyoming—and I think we were talking to someone yesterday from the state's attorney's office who was saying it's actually getting more white. Why do you think that those dynamics exist in Wyoming?

Johnson: [01:15:18] I think it's the weather. You haven't been here in the wintertime. We have a few—we have a huge air base here in Cheyenne, Wyoming. We get black airmen in here all the time, all races. And a lot of them do come here and retire just because of the low taxes. But once you've gone through a Wyoming winter where we have eighty-five, ninety-five mile an hour winds, and it's twenty below zero, you're looking for Florida. It's not—you've got to be tough if you're going to live in Wyoming. I think—I do have a lot of black friends that have retired here. So it's a personal choice. Cheyenne's nice in the summertime. But you need a second home if you're going to retire.

Q: Do you think—have you gotten any benefits from being white in your life? And put my question into your answer.

Johnson: [01:16:17] Have I got any benefits from being white in my life? I get sunburned. I get skin cancer. I had my ears cut off to get rid of cancer. I don't know what the benefit would be of being white. I just—I think the benefit I had was having a great family, a great mother and father, brother and sister. Loved each other. I don't think race has anything to do with that.

Q: Have there been any drawbacks? Have you felt any prejudice or have you felt any—have you had anything negative happen to you for being white?

Johnson: [01:17:03] Not really. I don't think I've felt any prejudice one way or another. I don't think I—no. I think people accept me as who I am. And that's it. That's life.

Q: And can you tell me a little bit about your family growing up? Was race ever discussed in your family growing up? Was it something that came up with your—you said you have a strong family. Was it something that your family talked about? Or was it not something that ever came up?

Johnson: [01:17:43] That's interesting story. We'd moved to Cheyenne. And my grandfather lived in Duncan, Oklahoma. So we'd take the train down there in the summertime to visit him and grandma. And I was three or four years old. And we get down there. And this is the first time

I'd ever seen a black person. They had a black maid that would clean their house. They were getting older. So they needed help around the house.

And I saw her. And I asked my mom what happened to her. I don't know. I mean, I knew she was different. And my mom just says, "Well, she's black." That was it. It wasn't—she said, "There's black people. There's white people. There's Asian people. There's—we're not all the same." I still remember that as a—and that was sixty-two years ago. [Laughs]

Q: No, it's funny. Because also when we're doing these interviews in the Midwest, I've heard similar—people who grew up in very sort of single-race communities, that experience when they first see someone—and it's usually as a child. It's really sort of trying to understand what that [unclear]. This is kind of a weird question. But are you—would you say you're happy that you're white?

Johnson: [01:19:20] I'm happy to be alive. I don't think white has anything to do with it. I think people try to make race a situation where they can benefit from it. It's not—it's how God made you. Accept what you are and who you are. Do the best that you can. Doesn't—

Q: So is having a conversation about whiteness in the context of what's going on in this country now—is it a waste of time? Doing something like this, are we exacerbating the situation? Is it a valid thing? People talk a lot about people of color, black people, Black Lives Matter. Is it out of balance to talk about whiteness?

Johnson: [01:20:08] No, what are you going to talk about? Tell me about whiteness. What is whiteness? Why am I—what did I do? I was just born. What does whiteness got to do with the cost of tea in China? It has nothing to do with anything. If you can make an argument—any leader to get ahead, they have to have—it's beneficial to have somebody to point to and say, you're the cause. These are the causes of the problem. Well, if you can blame somebody else for their living, how they're living, you're just exacerbating the race question in America.

I actually see it as—they're using race—like I said, the Democratic Party, they're using race to advance their agenda. They don't care about the blacks in Chicago. That's just collateral damage. They don't—no. As long as they get a big, strong voter bloc in Chicago and Cook County, [Illinois], that's all they want. They don't give a rat's ass about those children dying. It's collateral damage. As long as they stay in power, that's all their worried about.

Q: Do you think that your life would have been different if it was the same, but you were born as a black person?

Johnson: [01:21:44] No, I know it'd be different. If I had the same mother and father that loved me, told me I could be whatever I wanted to be, I think I would have the same life. If you don't have a mother and father that love you and tell you—and support you, you're S.O.L. [shit out of luck]. You need a family. You need a strong family. It doesn't take a village. It takes a mother and a father.

Q: So even growing up pre-Civil Rights, when you were growing up, that wouldn't have—you don't think that would have impacted your experience of the world?

Johnson: [01:22:24] Depends on if I was around nice people or bad people. It has nothing to do with race. There's people that are jerks in all races. I think I would gravitate to the nice people. But I think family is the most important part of the whole equation. If you don't have a loving mother and father, and they teach you how to love and love other people—not trying to benefit from them. But you have friends you laugh with and go fishing with. If I lived in Mississippi and went fishing with my friends, I'd be the same as living up in Wyoming. Going fishing for a different species here, though.

Q: I guess, what I think about is that—one of the things that got me thinking about doing this project was I have a black partner that I've made a lot of films with. And we've had very similar—went to the same high school together. Both went to the same type of colleges, both filmmakers. And we argue about everything. And we made these films together. And we really started feeling like, despite all our similarities—and he would say to me—we both live in New York [City]. And he lives in Harlem. I live downtown. I'd say to him, "Marco [phonetic], why do you live in Harlem? You're an NYU [New York University] professor. You teach down here. All your friends are down here." He said to me, "Well, when I go back to Harlem at night, I'm not black. When I'm downtown in this white part of town, I walk around—I'm black the whole time. Everybody—that's the way people treat me differently. And they don't just treat me—when I'm in an all-black community, it's like I can relax."

And that got me thinking about, well, yes, that's—that's actually—I never think about my race either. I don't have to think about it, because people—when I'm in a place—most places, I'm the majority. People see me as a person, not as a white person. And so that kind of got me thinking, well, that actually is—you feel like it's a passive difference. But it's actually an active—things that happen to you. Not having to think about it is a big thing. And I've traveled all over the country with him. We go to a hotel. I check in. He checks in, they ask him for his ID. And it's happened—I've seen it. I've seen it a dozen times.

And so that's what got me thinking about how we're living in these different worlds where he feels like he's always sort of on display. And I can just go about my life not worrying about that.

Johnson: [01:25:05] Well, if I was him, I'd move out of New York City. I'd move to Cheyenne where he's accepted for what he is. I don't think that—I think that that's a tragedy that he thinks that he gets treated differently. I think that's the mindset in a big city. And Cheyenne, Wyoming, everybody's welcome here. I think that's—you don't like the way your life's going, you can change it. And I would change it and move the hell out of New York City. If I felt that way, I'd be gone. I'd be looking for something else.

Q: And circling back a little bit to the idea of family as being sort of the core thing. Is it something that you feel that, if we're looking at this, the economic disparities, that white families, in general, have a stronger family unit than black families? Is that what's going on in this country that's driving this?

Johnson: [01:26:09] I think so. But I think that white families are starting to be destroyed, too, by the government interference. I think the family unit has to be strong. I think—there's a national disparity. If you're on welfare or unemployment, you're not going to make as much money as just working a forty hour job and overtime, and trying to save some money, and get ahead, and provide for the family. That's where the wage disparity is. Look for a better job. It's all up to the individual. It's not—the government can't provide for everybody. I think it's a crime that they try to provide for anybody. I think that's up to the family, and the churches, and the social society around their neighborhoods. They look out for themselves.

But I think once government gets involved in it, they're warehousing voters. Look at Chicago and San Francisco, [California]. They're warehousing voters to vote Democrat. They're paying them welfare or whatever and trying to make them feel good about their situation. But they're actually holding them down. They should allow them to excel. That's where we're failing in America and society.

Q: Do you feel like there's not like a—the idea of community? What is a community? At a certain point, don't you—we all agree we want a traffic light here. We want to pay for this cop. We want to have—know there's like a volunteer fire department that we're going to all chip some money and do so before a house catches on fire. In some way, there's—if you decide—unless you're an anarchist, there's some level of socialism. Even having a firehouse in the town. You're paying for it. Or a traffic light. So what is the line that we're drawing where we're saying, okay, we're going to contribute to put things that make our community stronger and say

we're going to pay for our school, and where does the line—where do we cross the line into a destructive level of having government involvement in our lives?

Johnson: [01:28:27] I think we're pretty close to that right now. The government is going to start destroying—I was saying right now that the government has destroyed the black families throughout America. If you pay teenage black girls to get pregnant, to have children, and the government is going to pay them, they're going to have more children without fathers in poor family situations. That's a total—that's the destruction of America there. If you pay people to have children out of wedlock and not have a strong family unit, that's the destruction of America right there.

Q: Do you feel connected to America? Here in Wyoming, you're kind of—people say, oh, we're kind of off the grid. We have a—you say leave New York, come here. Do you feel like a patriotic American connected to the wider America? Or do you feel not so connected to it?

Johnson: [01:29:27] Connected to the wider America? I don't—I just believe that wherever you are, wherever you live, you should have the freedom to do as you choose. That's what America is founded on. That's what it's all about.

Q: But do you feel part of an American community? I'm from New York. Garrett is here from California. We've had different experiences. We're similar in age. We're—is there something that pulls us together as Americans?

Johnson: [01:30:01] Free thought, capitalism, family, values, the church or synagogues. I think religion is an important part of America's heritage. We're trying to—trying to push that aside. When the Democratic Party will not put God in their platform, I think that is a tell-all to what the hell is going on in America. If you don't have a sense of responsibility, a sense of love for other people, that's terrible. I just think that that's where America is going. And need to stop that. Need to turn that around.

Q: When you're saying that it's [unclear] do you feel that there's no sort of prejudice in this country against anybody? Or do you feel like—is there—I would say over the last fifteen years there's been so many things—there's been such changes about demographics with different—with the browning of America as it were. With gay rights, with trans rights, with all these things. Would you say that there's actually—that we've reached a point where there is no prejudice in this country? Or do you still think that there's prejudice?

Johnson: [01:31:26] I know there's prejudice. They need to keep prejudice going so that they have a voter bloc that will vote them into power. The Democratic Party enjoys that voter bloc. They keep the prejudice going. They're not looking at anything more than a vote. They're not really helping those people in the ghettos. They're not helping people in welfare. You don't give a man a fish. You teach him how to fish.

Q: So I take it you're not a Democrat.

Johnson: [01:31:56] No. I don't think I'm a republican, either. I think I'm more of a libertarian.

Q: We've met a lot of those out here. That seems to be a big—

Johnson: [01:32:06] Just get the hell out of my way. Leave me the hell alone, government. Let me do my life. I'll be responsible. I think that's the trouble with America in politics right now is that politicians think that we can make your life enjoyable, and we'll make it perfect. Well, they can't. There's too many of us. You're responsible for your own life no matter who you are, where you are, where you live. You're responsible for yourself. If you don't get a good education or your parents don't tell you to get an education or help you out, that's your own fault.

Q: But I look at my family, right? I have an older sister who's mentally ill. And she's never been able to hold a job. She's never been able to function in the world. She's been on and off drugs, all these things. We take care of her, our family. We all chip in and take care of her, because she can't take care of herself. Does that not extend out into a community? If you're in Wyoming and there's certain people who have mental illness or chronic illness that we have to take care of? Or is it just we'll be like Eskimos and put them on ice and send them out? Do we have any responsibility to the weaker members of our community the way we feel responsibility to the weaker members of our families?

Johnson: [01:33:26] I think it goes back to the family unit, the basic family unit. Once you've destroyed that family unit—you have a strong bond between my mother and my father. They loved each other. They loved each one of their children. And they taught us to love other people.

Well, once you've destroyed that family unit, once you no longer have a father, and you're getting paid to have children, you've totally destroyed the family unit. You've destroyed any possibility of ever having a civilized commitment to other people. Once you're getting paid to have babies, you don't love that baby. That's just a paycheck to you. That is the total destruction of America right there.

Q: But do you feel any—what about that innocent child who's that baby that's born, and is now born into a situation with no—with a really bad family unit. Do you feel any obligation or responsibility to say, well, that's an innocent baby that's being brought into this world. As a member of my community, do I have an obligation then to take care of that child, to try to change its trajectory so that they don't become another person living that same life?

Johnson: [01:34:38] You do have a responsibility for that child. That child is totally innocent. But once you pay people to have babies, guess what? They're going to have more babies. They're not having babies because they love them. They're having babies because they're getting a government check. That's the total destruction of America there. Unless you bring back the family unit, that's where America is going wrong. You can see it in white America now. We're starting to degrade and separate. Once they've destroyed the family unit, and there's no more love involved, and that child is just a paycheck, that is the total destruction of America. That's not what America is about.

Q: Yes, but what I'm trying to get at is what's our responsibility—the way we have responsibility for our family members, what are our responsibilities to these innocent children?

How do we change that dynamic? How do we change that? How do we reverse that trend of the destruction? Is it—you can just say, well, we're going to eliminate the Democratic Party. You eliminate the checks. But is that—what about as members of a community, how do we take action to change the direction that that's going in? Is it through church? Is it through community—how do you—

Johnson: [01:35:56] I think it's through church. I think it's through your family, your extended family, your communities. But you can't just give somebody a paycheck and not expect anything in return. If I'm supporting your family and you're down on your luck and—I don't expect to give you a ham sandwich. And then you go down and make five bucks or whatever it costs to get whatever drugs you're on. I think it starts—there's a responsibility that everybody has to themselves. They should start with themselves. And I think that they're not teaching that—the family unit is gone. They're not teaching it in school. You're basically responsible for your own life. I think your mother and father—once you've destroyed that mother and father unit and that family, you're S.O.L. It'll be hard to ever understand how you can get better. I don't know what else to say there.

Q: And what about the way communities—Cheyenne is very different than New York, where I live. I know that we have sort of different needs if you're living in Cheyenne, if you're living in New York City. Do different communities have the right to make their own laws, how they want their community to run?

Johnson: [01:37:30] As long as they don't violate the [United States] Constitution. They should be able to do—I don't know what you're—how would you change anything?

Q: No, what I'm saying is—

Johnson: [01:37:39] The only thing you can do is not make it socially or financially acceptable to destroy the family. And that's what we're doing. We're paying children to have children. And that's destroying America. Once you get on welfare, once you have your welfare baby, that's nothing but a check in the mail. You have no responsibility. There's no love involved there.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your parents? Clearly your parents have had a huge influence on you and your worldview. And they've helped shape your life. Can you tell me about growing up with them? What are the key lessons that you took away from your parents and growing up with them?

Johnson: [01:36:31] Well, they spent time with me. They both did. Father teach me how to hunt and fish and camp out, take care of myself. But the most important thing they taught me was that I'm responsible for myself. When I was still young, if I screwed up, they'd help me out. But they told me that I'm responsible for myself in life. Nobody else is going to help you out. It's all up to you.

Q: Was there anything when Sam asked you to come sit with us—is there anything that you thought was really important to say in the context of a conversation like this, even if it's like, what you're doing is fucking bullshit. And you guys from Columbia [University]—

Johnson: [01:39:20] Well, I think that the both coasts are left coasts. And they don't know what America feels. You're in New York City where you're dependent on the American people to provide you food and energy and everything else. But you have no idea what we go through here. It's like *The Hunger Games*. I don't know if you've seen that.

Q: Which games?

Johnson: [01:39:46] *Hunger Games*. The mockingjay and—so New York City, the coasts are like that. They're ending up taking all the resources. And the coasts live lavish lifestyle. And they have no idea what we're doing in Middle America. That's why Hillary [Clinton] lost. She didn't know what the hell was going on. She was just totally lost. America is not what you think happens in the coast.

Q: I would disagree. And I'd say it's what happens on the coast and what happens in the center of the country. And I would make the same argument to you and say, well, New York City may—you may provide us food. But we send, I think, \$1.30 to the federal government for every dollar that we get back. We support—we get less federal money into New York State. And we support the Alabamas and the other states that can't generate their own money. So I think it's—and that what I mean about saying it's a family. We're happy to do that. We get something in

return. But the idea that we're somehow different from you, I think is—I think fundamentally—one of the things that I do in this project, I travel all over the country. And I'm an East Coast liberal atheist. You're a Wyoming religious conservative or libertarian.

Johnson: [01:41:11] Redneck.

Q: I bet you if you and I sit down and talk, we agree on eighty-five to ninety percent of the things. We agree on family, our responsibility. We want to have security. We want our families to survive. We want to have jobs. We want to have—our country to be—we agree about eighty-five, ninety percent of the thing. And the idea that somehow we're different, I completely reject that.

Johnson: [01:41:37] Well, I think you think that—here's what I think about liberalism in America. They think that the government is the problem—is the salvation. And I think that, like [Ronald] Reagan said, government is the problem. The bigger the government gets, the more programs they have—they have no touch on individual life. You have to go back to a smaller unit. Go back to your family. Your family unit is the most important part of your life. If you've lost your family unit, I don't know where you go. If you're an atheist, I don't know where you go. If you're somewhat religious, go to a church. People love you just for who you are. And I don't know how—I don't know what—atheism is not a religion. How do you explain that? I know church says we're all equal. Accept people for who they are.

But if you come to the church and want a handout, there's still a sense of responsibility. That if you're getting your pork and beans from the church, they're going to have some responsibility. If you just come there and eat and then go back out and go the bar and get drunk and are found on the street the next day, they're not going to be so receptive to give you that next meal. So you need to tell those people—teach them, not tell them, teach them that you're responsible for yourself. That's the ultimate responsibility is to yourself.

Q: Well, I agree with you one hundred percent. And I don't think government's the solution for everything, but I also think that it's—as a liberal, I don't think it's the enemy. I think that it's done good, and it's done bad. And we're trying—I agree that where we are is not great. But I guess—and just on the atheism thing, I would say that you're—as a humanist, I believe—I can never say—I never have the crutch of falling back and saying that's God's plan to have that person there. I consider every person my equal, every person my responsibility. And that I am no better than anybody else. And so I can never look at someone on the street and say—

Johnson: [01:43:47] So why aren't you a Republican?

Q: How do you know I'm not a Republican?

Johnson: [01:43:52] Well, that sounds like me.

Q: I would say I'm not a Democrat. I voted for Barack Obama, but I also worked on the [Ross] Perot campaign when I was in college and voted for George [H. W.] Bush I. I'm not—I think

everybody is very complicated in how we see the world. And I think that one of the reasons why we're here is I agree with you. A lot of the people that I work with in the city, they don't get out. And that's why we're here is to be—see people and talk to people about things. And it's—I'm not pretending to be something I'm not. And I'll be really honest with you. You can ask me anything about myself, and I will tell you exactly what I believe, same way you are to me. And I think that's—part of what's happened is there's this huge separation between us now that creates these false conflicts when we actually have the same goals.

Johnson: [01:44:44] That's right.

Q: We have the same goals for our families, for ourselves, and for our country. And we might have different ideas of how to get there, but I don't think that because—I don't think that Republicans are evil. I don't think that conservatives are evil. I think—my whole wife's family are Trump supporters. I love them. We have different views on [unclear]. But I certainly don't think they're evil. I love them as much as I love my own family. So I think it's—and that's part of why I think these conversations are so interesting. I don't want to talk to people who are like me. I want to talk to people who aren't like me. I'm much more interested in people who disagree with me and can change my mind and make me see where I have blind spots. Then—

Johnson: [01:45:28] Well, I think we both want the same thing for every citizen in America. We want them to have an enjoyable life like I have and like you have. I think that politics has got involved. And they take advantage of that situation. One way or another. Republicans do it. Democrats do it. Vote for me, and you'll have a better life here. Vote for me, and you'll get this.

And all we're doing is purchasing votes. And we need to see through that and say—not ask politicians, “What are you going to give me?” John F. Kennedy. Don't ask what you can do—

Q: [Unclear] can do for your country.

Johnson: [01:46:12] Yes. Yes, exactly. You're responsible for yourself. And I think family unit is the basic unit. And that's where we need to start. We can't destroy it. And I don't know how we're going to get out of this mess.

Q: How do you feel that the—I'm guessing you—you didn't vote for Hillary Clinton, I'm pretty sure of that. How do you feel that this administration is doing in bridging some of those divides so far?

Johnson: [01:46:48] They're doing a great job. They're providing jobs in the black community, which—Barack Obama just says, yes, just trust me. I'll get you a job. It'll be fine. Just keep voting for me. Well, now we have an economy that's actually moving. People are actually getting jobs, getting good jobs. And that's more important than being voted in and staying in power. Keep the economy going. That's where it needs to be. Everybody needs a job. Like I say, you have a sense of responsibility and accomplishment at the end of the day. I don't care what you do for a living. But you think, at the end of the day—I was a contractor, builder. I was a carpenter. Started as a carpenter. Well, even as a carpenter, when I built a wall, I had a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day that I did something. I felt good about it.

And I think that's—we need that sense of responsibility and that sense of accomplishment and sense of pride. Everybody needs that sense of pride. And I don't know—I don't think it's being taught in schools. I don't know how we're going to get back.

Q: Well, I think we're out of time now. So I wanted—is there anything else that you want to say that you think is really important to go on the record with about a conversation like this?

Johnson: [01:48:14] About what? Excuse me?

Q: Really important that you want to say that we didn't have a chance to talk about.

Johnson: [01:48:25] I don't know. I think—I mean, we can talk about everything we have—from drugs in the community, to alcoholism, to unwed mothers. But it all goes back to the family unit. If your family doesn't love you and support you, you're in for a long, long road in life. And you don't know which way to turn. You're not going to have the guidance there that your parents can provide. And I think that's the saddest part of where America's going now. I know people that are estranged from their parents and never—for the last forty years. And their parents are about to pass on. That's sad to me.

I know my brother was—he went to Stanford [University]. And he had never been in a situation like that where people were—these people had money. They sent their kids to the best colleges. And they weren't loved. They were sent away. And here's the money. More money than they know what to do with. And my brother came back that first year and he says, “I can't believe

how incredibly blessed I was to have a family that loved me.” He’d met people there that are—they were sent away. They never talked to their parents unless they needed money in their account. And that—I just—I don’t know. I think you are incredibly blessed if you’re loved by your mother and father. And they teach you right from wrong.

Q: We’re going to take a couple of photographs of you now.

Johnson: [01:50:15] Okay. Profile? [Unclear] [Laughter]

M1: We’ll get your good side.

Q: So just look at me. And we’re just going to—like let the camera roll and just take a—just relax your [unclear]

Johnson: [01:50:27] I should sit up straight, then, huh? [Laughs]

Q: And just totally relax your face. You can smile.

Johnson: [01:50:49] I still have crooked teeth. I don’t smile very much.

Q: I’m the same way. I don’t show my teeth when I smile. Okay, relax your face again. And Garrett’s going to take a couple of stills of you.

Johnson: [01:51:12] Are we done?

M1: One second. I'm going to—

[INTERRUPTION]

Johnson: [01:51:20]—share that with me.

Q: Do you—you didn't mention that, no.

Johnson: [01:51:26] I didn't say that. But I think that's—

Q: Do you want to say [unclear]. So tell me a little about your brother?

Johnson: [01:51:34] My brother and I were very close. He was two years older than me. He was a lot smarter than I am. He got a full scholarship to Stanford. And he went up Stanford to get his education. But the other thing that he hid from us—we always knew he was smart. But he hid from us that he was gay. So for thirty years of his life, he hid that part of his life from his family. I mean, we loved him. It didn't matter if he's gay or not. When we found out, we still loved him. We did everything we could. He ended up dying from AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] and pneumonia.

But I'm so saddened that I missed that part of his life. His partners were like my wife and myself. I mean, she is part of my life. His partners—he had two of them in his forty-six years—they were an important part of his life. And he didn't share that part—his life with me. And growing up, I'm kind of upset that [shows emotion]—I'm upset that he didn't share that with me. It wasn't a—I don't know what to say. He wasn't—that's just the way he was born. We accepted it and loved him just the same. And I resent that he didn't trust us enough to love him, that he didn't share that story with us earlier on. I'd have loved to have been part of his life. So that was a sad part of my life there.

Q: Why do you think he didn't feel comfortable sharing that with you?

Johnson: [01:53:37] You know, I don't know. I think in the '60s—he graduated in '69. I think it was cultural. But I don't know. I think he's—I think—well, I don't know for sure. But I think gays just naturally—they tried to hide that from their families, some of them did. So he went in the closet. He thought that's where he'd be secure and safe. And now that he's passed on, I can't tell him that I miss that part of his life. I would have loved to share that with him. Didn't mean—doesn't make a bit of difference to me. He's still my brother. I still love him. I'm going to cry.

Q: You're making me cry. You know, my youngest daughter is gay. And from early—and I'm so happy that she's felt comfortable talking to us about it.

Johnson: [01:54:56] Oh, yes. You're blessed.

Q: Yes, it's like—the idea you would—that it would change anything about how you feel about someone is just impossible to imagine. But I think it's a complicated life.

Johnson: [01:55:11] It is. I mean, I didn't judge him. And I don't judge blacks. I don't judge Asians. I mean, I still loved him. That's not a judgment call. That's the way he was born. And I still loved him as my brother.

Q: Thank you for sharing that story with us. I think it's—it's hard to talk about that stuff. So I appreciate you being—sharing that with us.

Johnson: [01:55:49] I think about him every day. He's still—it's funny. My mom calls and says, "Your brother's in the hospital." And I said, "Really? What happened?" She said, "Oh, he's got pneumonia." We think pneumonia, you know—medicine, science, they're going to cure everything. I thought, well, I'll stop by on the way before I go home. Stopped in and saw him. And we chatted a little bit. And I remember he had a nickel on his tray. He's eating dinner. And he looked at me. He says, "Here, you can have this." It was a nickel that's—I don't know what he—why. But I put that on his photograph at home. Still taped to that photograph of him. That was the last time I saw him. So that was pretty sad. I wish he was here again.

Q: It's sad for—it's also sad for him that he—not that you couldn't share that. But also that he couldn't share that with you.

Johnson: [01:57:08] Yes.

Q: Because he clearly loved you.

Johnson: [01:57:10] I'm mad at him for not sharing his life with me. When you love people, you share your life with them. You're part of their life. And it's a two-way street. That's how life works. We're all in this together. And if we're fighting each other, that's not the way to live. We've got to love one another. And we can't agree—don't have to agree on everything. But don't get in my way, and I won't get in your way. Leave me alone. Let me do what I want. We're fine.

Q: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you coming out and talking to us. Sam was like, "I don't know if we should"—

M1: Wait one sec. I'm going to take a portrait of you. I didn't [unclear]

[END OF INTERVIEW]