

CJ: Charles S. Johnson III

MA: Myra Armstead

Student: Hist 117 Student

This interview was recorded as part of Myra Armstead's 2017 course, Hist 117: Inclusion at Bard, which produced a series of oral histories with alumni/ae of color.

MA: We're delighted to have the opportunity to interview Charles S. Johnson for the BardCorps archives. Charles S. Johnson is a 1970 alum of the college. He is a lawyer with the firm Holland & Knight in Atlanta. And what I find very interesting is that he is related to Charles S. Johnson, Charles Spurgeon Johnson. Are you also 'Spurgeon'?

CJ: I'm Spurgeon. I'm Charles Spurgeon Johnson the third.

MA: The third. Okay. So, for someone like me, a historian focusing on U.S. history—late nineteenth to early twentieth century—Charles S. Johnson is a figure I want to—or, I feel like I'm using the present tense because I'm always in the archives. He was a sociologist, African American sociologist at University of Chicago Graduate, got his PhD there. And for a while he worked for the National Urban League in the research department but eventually went to Fisk [University]. I'll tell you, as a footnote, I read through the papers a year before last. I had an NEH—

CJ: Give me one second. I'm sorry, go ahead.

MA: Yeah, yeah.

CJ: This is a conference room in the State Bar of Georgia and people keep coming in, so I apologize.

MA: Yeah, no, no. It's alright. So I enjoyed reading his correspondence in the Schomburg Papers. And I'm talking—

CJ: Yeah.

MA: Because he was involved in acquiring the papers for the New York Public Library. Yeah.

CJ: Didn't know that.

MA: Yeah, so I'm writing—I'm gonna write about—I have written some, but I'm gonna write more. Anyway, Charles S. Johnson is also a trustee of the college. And you've been a trustee for how long?

CJ: I have no idea. I mean, I was an alumni trustee in the eighties. And then I've been on the board this time for probably eight years.

MA: Okay. So tell me what the connection is. You're not—Charles S. Johnson was not your father. He was your—is it uncle? How—

CJ: He's my father's father.

MA: Your father's father.

CJ: He's my grandfather.

MA: Oh, he's your grandfather! Okay. Alright. So then I'm thinking now—so Jeh Johnson is your uncle?

CJ: Well, Jeh Benson Johnson is my uncle. Jeh Charles Johnson is my first cousin.

MA: Okay, I got that. Anyway, with that as background, tell us about your decision to go to Bard. Did you consider other schools? How did you end up at Bard?

CJ: Well, when I was in high school, I thought I was interested in the theater. And so I looked at schools that had strengths in that area. And Bard was one. Catholic University of America in Washington was another. I chose Bard and it had the advantage of being near my uncle, Jeh Benson Johnson, in Poughkeepsie. So, I think that was a comfort to my parents. But the strength in the arts, and particularly in the theater, was what attracted me to Bard in the first place. And then I got on campus and found out that there were folks who were *really* interested in the theater who were dedicated and had already made life decisions to dedicate themselves to a career in the theater—they had their actor's equity cards. I did not. I was still searching for what I was interested in doing. When I told the drama department chair that for all I knew I might end up in law school, that wasn't a thing he wanted to hear. So I ended up majoring in government.

MA: Okay. So that meant you worked with Bob Koblitz?

CJ: Bob Koblitz and Heinz Bertelsmann, yeah.

MA: Right. We interviewed Toni Chapman-Travis.

CJ: Yes.

MA: So you overlapped.

CJ: Toni-Michelle was a year ahead of me.

MA: Okay, alright. So tell us a little bit about where you grew up? Where were you coming from? What city? And did you feel prepared for Bard academically and socially?

CJ: That's interesting. I grew up in Dayton, Ohio. I was born in Nashville when my grandfather was president of Fisk [University]. My father finished medical school at Meharry. We moved to Durham for his postdoc work and then we settled in Dayton in about 1951. I went entirely to parochial schools in Dayton from K through 12. I think that was an interesting choice that my parents made—to place me in parochial schools. I think they were fearful that there might be some neglect in the public schools in Dayton at the time. I think they were wrong because that was before desegregation, when public schools were neighborhood schools and the teachers pretty much had [audio cuts out] and knew your family. And so the folks that I knew who went to public schools in Dayton did quite well. I went to parochial school and it was very rigorous. It was all male. Taught by the Marianist Brothers. It was, academically, a good school. I didn't know what to expect in terms of the academic challenges at Bard, but I found myself prepared. As prepared as anybody. The adjustment, I think, was more cultural than it was academic.

MA: Talk about that cultural adjustment some.

CJ: Well, so it was not unusual to me to be in an interracial setting. The elementary school I went to was—the students were all black and the teachers were all white. The highschool I went to was predominantly white. There were probably thirteen—or thirty—blacks out of maybe twelve-hundred students. So that wasn't unusual, to be in an interracial setting. But it was the midwest. And it was a Catholic school. So I remember the first time I met somebody whose parents were not together, you know, who was a product of a divorce. That was a shock. So there are all kinds of things that go into “culture”.

MA: Mhm.

CJ: And just the different experiences that folks have, being from the Northeast—which is primarily where Bard drew its students at the time—created some differences. Which were a part of the excitement.

MA: Yeah, and then Bard in the late sixties, of course, was quite the liberal bastion. And so that must have been shocking, too, right? Coming from the Midwest.

CJ: The Midwest is pretty—yeah, it's not as liberal as Bard was at the time. I had the advantage of being taught by some folks that were part of a religious order. They were fairly open-minded and they encouraged freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression. So that wasn't new. So when I got to Bard I was kind of excited about the opportunity to continue exploring those opportunities. But it was almost a liberal ghetto in the sense that you didn't have the same diversity of thought at Bard that you had in places in the Midwest.

MA: Hm. Interesting phrase. The demographics in terms of diversity—can you describe it during your four years?

CJ: I don't recall the exact numbers, but I think when I enrolled there were six hundred students. Two hundred freshmen. And there might have been thirteen African Americans. I'm not sure if it's thirteen out of the freshmen class or thirteen total. I'm sure there were not more than thirty total. I graduated in a class of one hundred. That was the largest graduating class Bard had ever had. And out of that one hundred, there were three African Americans.

MA: So, did you find yourself—I don't know—gravitating at all towards any type of, or group of students? And I mean it very openly, you know, I'm not saying just Black students. But what kinds of students did you gravitate toward—

CJ: If you wanted to gravitate toward Black students, you're outta luck. Because there weren't many to gravitate toward. (laughs) And that changed over time. I was close with the guys in my dorm. I lived, Freshman year, in Sacks Annex (?), which was away from main campus. I think that it was the first time they decided to use houses in the Village of Annandale for overflow. Because we were a little separated from the main campus, we had an opportunity to bond with each other more so than with kids only on campus but we weren't completely isolated. Because you can't be completely isolated. So I gravitated toward, I guess, folks in that dorm and—let me see. I have the impression that my classmates were pursuing one intellectual passion or another. And that may or may not be true, but it was certainly true among the folks that I gravitated toward.

MA: Mhm.

CJ: Excited about something. Excited about something different.

MA: Right.

CJ: Some of them were excited just about finding what their passion was. But there was that energy. Intellectual energy.

MA: Right.

CJ: And it drew us to each other.

MA: One of the readings we did early in the semester of this class a few weeks ago was an excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois, his time at Harvard. And I'm struck by the fact that you had an uncle in Poughkeepsie. Du Bois—I mean it was a very different kind of situation or context—but he talks about how he didn't even try to interact socially with Whites on campus. And he had this separate world in Cambridge, you know, in Boston, that he associated with. Then he moved off campus. He did involve himself with some student associations, if they were tied to his intellectual interests. So, was there any parallel to that for you?

CJ: No. And we're separated by 75 years, at least. (laughs) You know, Du Bois was at Harvard at a very different time and when I was at Bard I had no—I think that Du Bois was isolated, not

entirely out of choice. And that wasn't my experience at all. I had no issue about acceptance among my peers. At all.

MA: Okay. Now, in terms of your context—so you went to the college in 1967. Uh, no—

CJ: Sixty-six.

MA: Sixty-six. So, while you were in college, Martin Luther King—a lot of things happened in the Civil Rights Movement. There was Bloody Sunday, Martin Luther King died, the rise of cultural nationalism and radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement—did that affect you on campus? Did you see how it affected students at large at Bard at the time?

CJ: Well, it affected me. I was kind of involved with it. Bloody Sunday was the year before I came to Bard.

MA: Sixty-five, right.

CJ: It was sixty-five. I vividly recall spending the summer between high school and college in Europe and I had occasion to visit an uncle of mine who was living as an expatriate in Monte Carlo and was eighty-five years old. And I was all excited about everything that was going on at home and I said 'You need to come back and be a part of all the change that's taking place. People are changing the world.' And this eighty-five year old gentleman said to me, 'Young man, I have paid my dues.' I remember being captivated by the events in Selma and I did some early writing at Bard about that. I grew up around folks who were involved in those activities. I mean, my grandfather, as you mentioned, started the social science department at the Urban League, founded Opportunity Magazine, which was their official organ. And then he was brought to Fisk to start the department of social sciences there and was part of—well he led a team of researchers documenting conditions in the South in the period beginning in 1928, all the way through his death in 1956. And so, his second son was a sociologist named Robert Johnson, who was teaching at Wilberforce University at the time and was an advisor to some of the SNCC students who trained at—who were oriented at Wilberforce, before they went south. In highschool, I was regaled by his stories that were relayed to him by the SNCC students about their time in the South. When I was at Bard, we had something called Field Period, which was a six-week period between semesters when students were required to spend some time doing something related to their majors, and it was required that you successfully complete three of them in order to graduate. So the Field Period my freshman year I spent interning at the Dayton Urban League. So I was getting involved—and I had been involved with the Urban League before that—but I did a study of the opportunities available in the community of Dayton for political appointments for African Americans back then. And then after my freshman year, I had an internship at an organization called Metropolitan Applied Research Center, in New York, which was an institute on urban problems run by Kenneth Clark, who was a psychologist who you will know because he authored the doll studies in the Brown case. He was a very famous psychologist. He had this institute in Columbus Circle in New York and I was one of the interns. He also had fellows, and the fellows included people like John Lewis and Julian Bond and Roy

Innis—these are names you may or may not be familiar with—but one day John Lewis came into my office and said “SCLC is having a convention in Atlanta would you like to go?” So, what am I gonna say? Here’s a guy who was already—he probably had not been canonized as a living saint by Time Magazine by then—but he was certainly one of the big six in the Civil Rights—in the March on Washington. I knew who he was. And the opportunity to go to an SCLC convention in 1967 was very exciting. So my introduction to Atlanta was with John Lewis and through the lens of the folks who were changing the world, and certainly changing the South. So I got to meet the leadership of SCLC and the leadership of SNCC. Dr. King was beginning to organize his Poor People’s Campaign, which was 1968. He was beginning to organize then, at that convention in Atlanta. And I ended up being asked to serve as something of a Mid-Hudson field coordinator for the Poor People’s Campaign as a student at Bard during my sophomore year.

MA: How exciting!

CJ: Yeah, so (laughs) I kind of got involved very early.

MA: Yeah, yeah.

CJ: So I was affected pretty much directly because I had the opportunity to get involved. But, you know, certainly everybody was aware of what was going on on campus and what strikes me is—so my sophomore year, we’re going into fall of sixty-seven, spring of sixty-eight. So the fall of sixty-seven you have the mass mobilization against the Vietnam War on the steps of the Pentagon. I was involved with that. Spring of sixty-eight, they were gearing up more for the Poor People’s Campaign. The Poor People’s Campaign was bringing poor people from around the South to Washington to camp out on a mall in Washington to confront the seated government about economic justice. And in the middle of organizing that campaign, Dr. King also got involved with the Memphis Campaign. It was in his involvement in the Memphis Campaign that led to his assassination. And I vividly recall that day at Bard when the campus really was in shock. Here we were, you know, seven hundred miles from Memphis, but it was an event that basically shook us—and probably shook people all over the country—but certainly shook us on campus. And folks kind of spontaneously—

MA: Charles, we’re going to have to dial back in because we’re not able to hear you.

CJ: Alright.

MA: Just stay where you are and we’ll come back.

CJ: Oh, my. (laughs)

[Audio cuts out for two minutes]

MA: Okay, just stay where you are. Alright, so this is going to be awkward Charles, but you were at the critical point, and we were listening intently and you kept fading and we couldn’t hear you.

So, you were talking about the reaction on campus among your friends to the assassination. You had explained the Poor People's Campaign and King's involvement in Sanitation Workers' Strike in Memphis, and then his assassination. So, could you repeat that?

CJ: Well, I think it's Sottery Hall, that's the place across from Ludlow.

MA: Right.

CJ: Which was one of the larger lecture spaces on campus at the time. People just descended on that location from all over campus to just be together, to try to grasp the magnitude of what was going on, and the meaning—I recall being so bitter as to say to somebody, "It's *your* country." The shock—it was felt all over the country—it was felt at Bard, as well. That night, cities around the nation erupted in urban rebellions. People started rebellions in D.C. and several cities around the country. It didn't happen in Annandale obviously, but what did happen instead is folks coming together to try to just understand the meaning of what was going on.

MA: Right.

CJ: It was certainly not an event that was ignored.

MA: Right. So were there—how can I put this—were there any sort of more formal steps taken at that time? In other words, you were working with people in government—faculty and government. Were there special speakers or lectures or was it just people coming together, having informal sort of town-hall-type talks?

CJ: There was nothing formal at Bard. I appreciate what you're saying. I read a book recently about the response at Holy Cross. And there was a particular professor—he was a priest—who was a chair of the Department of Theology at Holy Cross, who was moved by that assassination, and his response to it was to make a decision to build diversity on the campus of Holy Cross. And so that's why you have Clarence Thomas going to Holy Cross. As a result of that effort that this particular priest decided to be his response to those events. I don't recall any formal response at Bard.

MA: Right, right. Now, after King's assassination, the so-called radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement—which was happening anyway—just sort of picked up steam. And one could say that there were a couple of directions that people who were concerned about Black rights took. So there was this sort of radical turn left and then there was a move—it became obvious by the early seventies—towards what was called political incorporation. In other words, "Now let's get elected, we have the laws. We can vote. We can elect people." So, where were you ideologically? Because I'm trying to get you to law school (laughs) from Bard.

CJ: Okay, well I decided to go to law school because I knew I didn't wanna teach political science and, no offense (laughs) –

MA: It's alright. (laughs)

CJ: But that wasn't anything that—and somebody suggested to me that if I was really trying to figure out what made society tick, I might want to consider a legal education. The Dean at Bard, Carl Selinger, had been an assistant dean at University of Colorado Law School. He advised me to consider University of Virginia and Boston College when—actually, I had been accepted into both, and he recommended Boston College based on the strength of the reputation of Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest who had built Boston College into a national law school. And as soon as I got there, Father Drinan left and ran for Congress and got elected, and ended up on the House Judiciary Committee. But one of the things that I was influenced by was the whole notion that really—Dr. King, towards the end of his life, was talking about economic justice. Now he was just one of many voices talking about economic justice, as well as political power. And it seemed to me that that was an area where I could add some value, in terms of assisting in bringing about economic justice. And so, as well as doing what I could do assisting here and developing political power—and that was what was so exciting about coming to Atlanta. Atlanta was a great alternative to going home to Dayton, but it was also a place that was just an exciting place to be. It was a place where you knew that there was a critical mass of African Americans who had developed institutions—economic institutions, as well as social institutions. And who had enough of an influence on majority institutions that they were of influence. And so seventy-three, which was the year I came to Atlanta, was the year that Maynard Jackson was running—

MA: Oh, yes.

CJ: For mayor. Maynard Jackson was the first African American mayor of a major southern city and he got elected pledging to end police brutality—which was an issue then. Black folks were getting pulled over, they were getting stopped, they were getting killed by police. And one of Maynard Jackson's pledges was to fire the police chief. So it's very interesting that—Jackson was kind of a focal point of a movement in Atlanta to bring about change. And change was more than Black political power: it was total inclusiveness. In the sense that this was a city in which heretofore the decisions had been made from the top, you know, major decisions about the course and the direction of the community—they, in rooms smaller than the room I'm sitting in now, white guys sitting around a table deciding on major issues related to the direction of the city. And the neighborhoods—whether they were Black neighborhoods or White neighborhoods—were only informed about these decisions later. And one of the things that took place in connection with the election of Maynard Jackson was the whole notion of neighborhood involvement, community involvement in decision making at all levels. So there was a whole lot of change that Maynard Jackson had to manage. One was the rising expectations of folks that had been shut out of any participation in the decision making process around politics and business, both in terms of racial exclusion and in terms of exclusion by the people at the top. It was just an amazing thing to—I had a ringside seat to watch. It's a small enough community where you can't just sit on the sidelines—certainly if you have any kind of talent to bring to the table, you're gonna get recruited. (laughs) And that's what happened to me. I got involved in Atlanta very early and I didn't find it to be all that cliquish. I found that if you show yourself as

somebody who is willing to roll up your sleeves and help out, you are welcome. And that's the kind of reception I found coming to Atlanta.

MA: Okay.

Student: Wait—

MA: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, here's somebody from Atlanta who wants to— (all laughing). A POSSE student. Alright, ask a question. He can see you right there.

Student: Alright.

CJ: I can see you. (laughs)

Student: My name is Tobias. I'm from Atlanta and I wanted to ask—

CJ: How are you?

Student: I'm good, how are you?

CJ: Fine, thanks.

Student: I'm from some of the ghettos and bad neighborhoods in Atlanta that are pretty historic, like Herndon Homes, for example. And I wanted to ask what sort of blockages did you and Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young and some of the other politicians find? Like what sort of blockages did you run into finding funding for urban development?

CJ: Oh, that's so interesting. Yes, you see I've been in Atlanta for—since 1973, so there have been a lot of changes taking place and it's interesting—when you mention Herndon Homes—Herndon Homes doesn't exist anymore. The reason why it doesn't exist anymore is very controversial. There was a time—and maybe you still have it in other cities—the first public housing in the country was in Atlanta. It was Techwood Homes and the Clark Howell Homes and the University Homes. And so you had these communities where folks came because they couldn't afford to live anywhere else. And they were reliable sources of votes. And so part of the playbook of anybody running for office in the Black community was to make sure you got folks from these communities out to vote. Well, Atlanta has been at the forefront of dismantling these communities, turning them into mixed income communities and dispersing two-thirds of the residents to other places in the city—I'm sorry, in the metro area. Outside of the city. And so you find yourself in a situation where, you know, when I came to Atlanta it was sixty-six percent Black, or something like that. It's more like fifty now because of displacement of poor folks and African American folks, and an influx of middle class folks whose family the generation before had fled the city to avoid desegregation. And so we find ourselves in a situation where the demographics are changing as a result of decisions that had been made about these communities that you talk about, like Herndon Homes. But in terms of funding, funding is always

a struggle if it's about helping poor folks. I served on the board of the—I chaired the Atlanta Urban League for a while, and we were always struggling to get assistance. And we knew where we could get a receptive ear. And a lot of places, we couldn't. Fortunately, the early years that I was in Atlanta, Atlanta was kind of a center and—it cost us so many votes—Black votes in Atlanta could not be ignored by politicians who were not Black. As time went on, you were able to see progress in terms of people of color going into decision-making positions throughout the State Legislature, as well as city government. And then all of a sudden, the demographics changed and the composition of political parties completed itself at around 2000. And all of a sudden, we had Republican control. Georgia was always a one-party state. In 2002, it flipped from a one-party Democratic state to a one-party Republican state. Because parties are so identified by race in the South, the folks who came into office in 2000 appear to have had no interest in the kind of inclusiveness that we had seen before 2002. And that translates into funding issues so that we knew what businesses to solicit for help at the Atlanta Urban League before 2002. Things became difficult after 2000. One of my clients is the largest health system in the southeast, Grady Hospital. And I can tell you that, before 2002, if Grady had a problem with the structure of the Medicaid program, they could pick up the phone and call the governor. After 2002, if Grady had a problem with the structure of the Medicaid program, they had to hire me to take them to court—take the State to court to get a judge to tell the State to follow their own rules. So that kind of dynamic—that's only part of the dynamic that I've seen. It's a very complex story, but it's an interesting one. Yes, sir?

Student: Yo, hi. My name is Hyden. I am so glad to be here cause I'm from Atlanta. Can y'all hear me?

MA: Come closer, Hyden.

CJ: Come closer.

Student: Hi.

CJ: Yes.

Student: My name is Hyden, I'm from Atlanta also. Earlier you were talking about economic success. And I believe I share a very similar mindset in getting my people to be economically competitive with White people, in the system they created. So, as someone who also shares that mindset, how does one actually go about doing that?

(classroom groans)

Student: Did you get that? Oh, you got it? We're good?

MA: Okay, alright.

Student: So, how does one actually go about getting the people to get that economic advantage? How does one actually capitalize on that economic advantage in Atlanta?

CJ: You know, if I knew the answer to that question (laughs), I'd get a Nobel Prize, I'm sure. Or at least a MacArthur Genius Grant. But, a lot of it is a function of individual effort. In terms of individual pursuit of educational opportunities and entrepreneurship. And then, the interesting thing about what happened in Atlanta—part of the interesting thing is that—I'll go back to Maynard Jackson a lot because he's a hero of mine. One of the things that he saw as his mission was to leverage the power of government to create economic power. And so city government and related governments like the transit system, school system, are major. They spend millions of dollars. And before Maynard Jackson got elected, everybody that was a recipient of those million dollars—nobody that was a recipient of any of those millions of dollars looked like me. Or looked like us. And Maynard was about changing that through democratizing, opening up and creating areas of opportunity, avenues of opportunity for folks who hadn't gotten opportunities before. You start to see the rise of minority business utilization programs, disadvantaged business utilization programs that were designed to, in an intentional way, reach out to those folks who were in the community who had businesses but didn't have the opportunities to take their businesses to the next level. And government was taking an affirmative step to make those opportunities available to folks who hadn't had those opportunities before. That's been an area of contention for the last forty years because there's been—you know, every step along the way there have been legal challenges and so: can government consider race in contracting? That's a question that began to be asked at the Supreme Court up and down the line since then. And basically the law has been all over the place—one time it was stated that 'okay, if you have a documented history of discrimination, then you can create a remedy for that discrimination. And it can be, if the history has been race-conscious discrimination, you can have a race-conscious remedy to that discrimination by reaching out for folks with preferences.' But those have been continually attacked along the way and the courts, in the early years, were somewhat supportive and had become less so. Therefore it becomes a constant struggle to address the changes in the law that limit how you can make these opportunities available. Now it's cloaked in terms of disadvantage as opposed to race, and even then you gotta document the disadvantage and all that. One of the things that we had an advantage of, what we see in lots of communities is, in cities, people of color often have numbers. Numbers translate into votes. Votes translate into political power. And we have seen that political power can be leveraged for economic power. That is one tool. It's not the only tool. But if an opportunity opens itself up to you, you gotta be prepared if the opportunity comes. And so it's more than just getting government to change what [...] but making sure you have folks in the talent pool who are available to respond to those opportunities when they come. I don't know if that was a satisfactory answer to your question.

Student: That was exactly what I needed to hear.

MA: Okay, good. That was very helpful to him. Maybe a couple more questions from students? Okay, alright, here's Tobias again.

Student: Okay, I just like anybody from Atlanta. (laughs) No, but I would like to hear you talk about going away from, transitioning to trying to get more diversity in politics. And how the political shift changed from just giving into politics itself, to actually fighting real social problems like drugs and poverty and crime and violence within the city. I wanted to see if you could talk about how you and people you are around kind of went through that shift, and when did that shift actually happen. Because I don't know how the city changed—or *when* the city changed. But I do know how, just by my own personal experience. So I would just like to hear how, like, that madness was for you, one dealing with diversity on one hand and then having to deal with social problems, just within the Black community within Atlanta.

CJ: I think I understand the question. There are a lot of ways to answer the question. One is this: that we were fortunate, in the early years of change in Atlanta, that the people who were advanced—and I don't say step-forward, but were advanced—Atlanta had a very deliberate process of vetting folks so that not just anybody got political support in Atlanta. You had a very elaborate and sophisticated, highly organized community. And so there was a consensus building process that occurred in the community so that it wasn't automatic that Maynard Jackson would be the person that would get political support in 1973. There were a lot of other highly credible African American candidates there during that time. But the consensus formed around—and Maynard had a sense of mission. He wasn't there just for the office, he was there for a mission to bring about some change. To open up city government and open up government in general and provide opportunities for folks. And the question that presented itself then, and has continued to present itself, is: does changing the racial composition in and of itself, is that the solution? It isn't always a solution. Sometimes, it causes a limit to what elected officials can do. Sometimes, it's because the people that run for office aren't about a mission of helping people. They're about a mission of helping themselves. And so you've gotta be very deliberate about who you select, and then if you end up with Black control of a city government, or all the governments in a metro area—which happened in Atlanta in the eighties and nineties—what does that do to the people who were advocates before? Do they feel as free to criticize elected leaders if they look like them? And so there's this whole dance that's done from time to time about how do you hold people accountable? How do you decide to hold people accountable once you elect folks in office? So for example, the Atlanta public schools [system] was subject to a desegregation lawsuit for decades that was resolved in a compromise whereby the Atlanta branch of the NAACP decided to go after political power, as opposed to massive student reassignment. And they got kicked out of the National NAACP as a result of that. Their notion was that if you change the face of who's running the system, that good things will follow from that. And good things did follow from that, to a point. But there's a limit to that. And so it becomes an issue of not just participating on election day, but a continual effort on the part of populations to hold their elected officials accountable. So you can't just send somebody into office and just expect them to do what you want them to do. You've got to continue to be active, continue to be vocal, and continue to be heard so other folks are reminded why they were sent there. I may have gotten far away from your question in my answer, so, if I didn't answer the question, I apologize.

Student: Well, no no no no. You're talking about mostly what I—thank you.

MA: So we wanna go—oh, I'm sorry. Here's a question.

Student: Can you hear me from here?

CJ: Yes. But shout anyway.

MA: Come up.

Student: Hi, I'm Ellen. I'm a senior. I was wondering what was the relationship with Bard and Red Hook and Tivoli? But specifically the relationship with the students of color on campus and with the locals. How was that back then?

CJ: Okay. I didn't understand the question, I'm sorry.

Student: I'm sure Tivoli and Red Hook existed when you were here. So I was wondering what was the relationship between Bard students and the local community? And then Bard students of color and the local communities around Bard.

CJ: I was not aware of much of a relationship. At all. Between Bard and the surrounding communities. Maybe there was one, but there was a sense of Bard being an enclave. And there's the whole town/gown [...] And at that time it was a dichotomy. It was townies versus folks on campus and there wasn't much interaction. I'll just put it that way. At that time, I can tell you, and not necessarily Red Hook and Tivoli, but the whole Dutchess County-Upstate New York area was known as a bastion of brutes that you may have—you may have heard of the Minute Men, which were an ultra-rightwing paramilitary organization that existed in Upstate New York in the sixties and seventies. And so there was some sense that you were leaving a place of safety when you left the campus. It didn't prevent you from leaving the campus, but you just had that consciousness. Or I did, anyway.

MA: Alright, thank you. Let me just ask you a couple of just very general, open ended questions. Looking back as a whole, what would you say are the most memorable aspects of your time at Bard? What were the most favorable aspects of your years at Bard?

CJ: You can't beat the setting. I mean, the people are great, cause there were people who generally are—everybody is passionate about something and they wanna share that passion, they want to support each other in that fashion. And that atmosphere was great. The setting was great. It got to the point where I took a semester off and studied at Fisk. It served a number of purposes. In the spring semester of my junior year I got a chance to take some courses in the African-Caribbean Studies Department at Fisk that were not available at Bard. But also did get a chance to get away, which was helpful in terms of being able to come back for senior year a little bit refreshed. But in terms of the most memorable thing, I have to say, was my graduation. We presented an honorary degree to Julian Bond. I spoke to one of Professor Berkowitz's classes a while back and mentioned that and Professor Berkowitz suggested I ask if people knew who

Julian Bond was, and a lot of people didn't. But he was another leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the sixties and my grandfather hired [...] to Julian [...] profession was public speaking. And Bard doesn't pay commencement speakers and so he received the degree but didn't speak. So our speaker was one of our classmates who was elected to give an address, the theme of which was Bard is a heavy trip. The other thing that was memorable about it was—this was during a tumultuous time in the country. You had all kinds of radical action taking place. And the way it found its way onto campus—there was a debate over whether to finish classes in the spring of sixty-eight because of what was going on in Vietnam and Cambodia. A decision was made by some folks to finish class. Meanwhile, the night before commencement, somebody dismantled the tent where the commencement was to be held. And the tent was apparently re-erected in time for graduation. People marched in to the tent and before the exercises could begin, somebody announced that somebody had phoned in a bomb threat. So we had to evacuate the tent. So everybody moved their seats from inside the tent to the side of the tent and then proceeded. So it was not your average graduation, I would guess. So every spring, certainly the spring of sixty-nine and spring of seventy, were occasions when President Nixon escalated the war in Southeast Asia in one way or another. And another spring when I was on campus was the Six-day War in the Middle East, so folks were leaving to go get involved with that. There was always some excitement related to the wider world taking place on campus in the Spring.

MA: So the fact that you graduated. (laughs) You think that was memorable?

CJ: It's true.

MA: And what would you change about your years at Bard if you could? Anything you would alter?

CJ: I would say this: that my time away from campus, like I said, was occasioned by two things. It was occasioned by a desire to have a different experience—to be away for a while. It was also a desire to have an HBCU experience. But it was also a desire to pick up some academic experiences that were not available at Bard. So the kinds of courses that were available in the African-Caribbean Studies at Fisk weren't available at Bard. Professors didn't profess any kind of competence—they could've tried—but they didn't profess any kind of confidence in these areas. And my assumption is, what I hope is the case, is that some greater diversity has occurred in the curriculum, so that it's a little less eurocentric, a little more appreciative of the fact that civilization is not limited to one particular area of the globe.

MA: Well, that has happened. (laughs) I wanted to say just a few things. Final footnotes. You know, I went to the University of Chicago, and then trying to decide what to do—I went in as a political scientist, and very quickly decided this wasn't for me—but I was lured into a job at the research department at the Urban League in Chicago.

CJ: Oh!

MA: Yeah, so I can't remember who it was—Vernon Jordan was national director, but Jim—I can't remember his name. Jim—oh, I was waiting for you to finish it. But he was the director, and it was the premier agency. It was this sort of—

CJ: Chicago?

MA: Yeah, at the time.

CJ: Well, I'll tell you that for my grandfather it was formative. He finished his degree at Chicago right after the Race Riots.

MA: Right, in 1918.

CJ: In 1919, at that end and basically it was a situation that started off with Whites attacking a group of Blacks who went into the wrong section of the beach and it ended up becoming a city wide—certainly very broad-based situation of Whites attacking Blacks all over the city. And after, there was an effort to try to figure out what happened and why. And so the Chicago commission on race relations was formed to try to look into that. The governor was a sponsor. Julius Rosenwald put some money into it. Julius Rosenwald was a big supporter of the Chicago Urban League, which had the research capabilities. So my grandfather was assigned to the Urban League as a principal researcher—principal investigator on the study of the conditions leading to the riots in Chicago in 1919. The study's been published as "The Negro in Chicago". It was that study that kind of gave him his entree into all things Urban League research. I think that there may have also been—I learned later that he also went to school with Eugene Kinckle Jones in Richmond. So Eugene Kinckle Jones, I think, was the first rector of the National Urban League. So then after the Chicago study he was asked to come to New York to start a social science department there. A lot of great sociologists come out of University of Chicago, starting with Robert Park, who was my grandfather's mentor, who was the father of American sociology.

MA: Right. So this is the last thing I'll say: I just thought of the correspondent your father was in touch with over—your grandfather—over the Schomburg Collection. The last name was Collinsworth.

CJ: Okay.

MA: And, yeah. Because it wasn't clear where Schomburg was going to donate this. And then for a little minute, there was some consideration of—the Urban League was involved and Schomburg had spent some time at Fisk—but anyway, the New York Public Library got a hold of it through the Carnegie Foundation.

CJ: I look forward to more conversations with you about that. That sounds fascinating.

MA: Well, thank you so much. We very much appreciate your reflections. Thank you.

CJ: Best of luck to everybody.

MA: Okay.

All students: Thank you. (clapping)

Transcribed by Helena Isabella Haid in the fall of 2022.