



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Joe Johnson papers

1961-2018

Sc MG 982

Home to Harlem Project funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Processed by Allison Hughes in 2022.

Summary

Creator: Johnson, Joe, 1940-2019

Title: Joe Johnson papers

Date: 1961-2018

Size: 4.0 linear feet (4 boxes)

Abstract: Joe Johnson (1940-2019) was a poet and writer who was a member of the Umbra Poets Workshop, a group of young Black writers who met on New York City's Lower East Side from 1962 to 1965 to conduct readings and discuss writing and politics. The Joe Johnson papers consist largely of writings—mostly poetry and fiction, with some drama and nonfiction—by Johnson, as well as notebooks, personal and professional files, and printed material.

Preferred citation: [Item], Joe Johnson papers, Sc MG 982, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Allison Hughes in 2022.

Creator History

Joe Johnson was born January 18, 1940, in Harlem. As a young man, he became involved in the Umbra Poets Workshop, a group of young Black writers who met on New York City's Lower East Side from 1962 to 1965 to conduct readings and discuss writing and politics. Johnson's writing appeared in various periodicals, including *Umbra*, *Black Creation*, and *Yardbird Reader*, as well as anthologies including *Poets of Today* (1964) and *The Poetry of Black America* (1973). His published books of poetry include *At the West End* (with Bliem Kern, 1976), *Hot* (1977) and *Tight* (1978).

In 1973, Johnson formed a publishing company with two other former Umbra members, Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon. The group, Reed, Cannon & Johnson Communications, published works by authors of color, including *Francisco* by Alison Mills, *Black Picture Show* by Bill Gunn, and *Medicine Man* by Calvin Hernton, for which Johnson wrote the introduction.

Johnson attended Hunter College in the early 1960s, then Columbia University, earning a bachelor's degree in art history and English in 1970 and a master's in linguistics from Columbia Teachers College in 1973. He worked at the Harlem Education Project (1962-1963) and City College (1971-1972), before joining the faculty of Ramapo College in New Jersey, where he taught literature from 1971 until his retirement in 2017. He lived in New York until his retirement, after which he moved to Virginia.

Johnson died on February 17, 2019.

Sources: Rush, Theresa Gunnels, Carol Fairbanks Myers, and Esther Spring Arata. *Black American Writers Past and Present: A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975.

Shockley, Ann Allen, and Sue P. Chandler. *Living Black American Authors: A Biographical Directory*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1973.

Scope and Content Note

The Joe Johnson papers consist largely of writings—mostly poetry and fiction, with some drama and nonfiction—by Johnson. There is also a significant number of notebooks containing a mix of writing drafts, journals, and personal notes. Personal and professional files include material relating to Johnson's publishing business, Reed, Johnson, & Cannon Communications, his teaching career at Ramapo College, and a small amount of personal material and correspondence. Finally, there is printed material, including flyers, press clippings, periodicals, and poetry books (many inscribed to or annotated by Johnson).

Key Terms

Subjects

African American poets
Black author

Names

Cannon, Steve, 1935-2019
Johnson, Joe, 1940-2019
Reed, Ishmael, 1938-
Umbra Poets Workshop

Container List

Writings 1983-2017

The writings consist mostly of typescript drafts, many annotated with Johnson's notes and edits. Many are spiral bound (in some cases the bindings have been removed).

The writings are arranged by genre: poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction. Within these groupings, they are arranged alphabetically by title, if present, or first line (all titles in quotes are Johnson's own). Some untitled fiction is grouped together when they appear to be versions of the same story or featuring the same character(s).

Poetry 2010-2017

- b. 1 f. 1 "Big Daddy, please daddy make wife, not black" 2017
pp. 1-50
- b. 1 f. 2 "The black woman is a subway"
pp. 1-81
- b. 1 f. 3 "Blue"
- b. 1 f. 4-7 "Codes"
- b. 1 f. 8 "Codes" and "Heat"
Spiral bound together with other poems.
- b. 1 f. 9 "The Deep End"
pp. 1-50
- b. 1 f. 10 "Fragments"
pp. 1-50
- b. 1 f. 11-14 "Harlem"/"Forty Deuce" 2010-2016
Several spiral-bound books with annotated poems and notes on a work in progress with sections titled "Harlem" and "Forty-Deuce."
- b. 1 f. 15 "Heat"
pp. 1-43
- b. 1 f. 16 "Here"
pp. 1-50
- b. 1 f. 17 "Jazz"
pp. 4-59
- b. 1 f. 18 "Lap Dance"
- b. 1 f. 19-20 "Misc MS"
- b. 1 f. 21 "neon night time neon"
- b. 1 f. 22-23 "Origins" 2017
pp. 1-50
- b. 1 f. 24 "The Science of my Doubts"
pp. 1-45
- b. 1 f. 25-26 "The sudden rain of women" 2017
pp. 1-44
- b. 2 f. 1 "There are here" 2014
- b. 2 f. 2 "There They Are" 2014
pp. 1-44
- b. 2 f. 3 "The Woodside"
pp. 1-50
- b. 2 f. 4 Miscellaneous Drafts and Fragments

Writings (cont.)

Fiction 2016-2017

Africa 2016

b. 2 f. 5 "African Notes"

b. 2 f. 6 Draft, pp. 2-95 2016

b. 2 f. 7 "Collation"

Handwritten bound notebook. Featuring the characters Velma and Hickcock; a version of this story is also included in the longer short story collection (version 2).

"Dogs of Athens"

Notes for a spy novel in progress.

b. 2 f. 8 "Notes, Stories, Plots, and Outlines" 2017

b. 2 f. 9 James Patterson Teaches Writing workbook

b. 2 f. 10 "He Shoulda Picked Up On a Trade"

Handwritten. This story is also included in the longer short story collection (version 2).

b. 2 f. 11 "It wasn't easy for a grown man to go through life with the name Pussy"

O'Neill

Drafts of novels in progress featuring the character O'Neill, a New York City detective. An excerpt of an O'Neill novel was published as "Searchin'" in *Black Creation* (Fall 1971).

b. 2 f. 12 Draft, pp. 1-129

Typescript draft with handwritten edits (photocopy).

b. 2 f. 13 Draft, pp. 1-156

Typescript draft with handwritten edits and chapter outline.

b. 2 f. 14 Draft, pp. 1-201

Bound typescript draft with handwritten edits.

Short story collection

b. 2 f. 15 Version 1

Contains "Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness," "That Woman," "He Shoulda Picked Up On a Trade," "A Man Without a Name," "Yes, Jesus Loves Me," and "A Man's Best Friend."

b. 2 f. 16 Version 2

Pages 1-162. Contains "Yes, Jesus Loves Me," "A Man's Best Friend," "The Chicken and the Hawks," "The Perfect Gentleman," "That Woman," "The Man Who Liked Color TV," "The Chump," "Collations," "Cleanliness is Next to Godliness," "Anywhichaway," "He Shoulda Picked Up On a Trade," "If I Ride This Train," and "Jesus Build a Fence All Around Me."

b. 2 f. 17 "Stumps heard them laughing when he was feeding his pigeons"

Velma and Hickcock

b. 2 f. 18 Draft, pp. 1-94

Draft, chapters 1-21

b. 2 f. 19 Chapters 1-14

b. 2 f. 20 Chapters 15-21

b. 2 f. 21 Various drafts

With short stories "Yes, Jesus Loves Me," "A Man's Best Friend" (incomplete), "The Perfect Gentleman," "That Woman," and "The Man Who Liked Color TV" (incomplete).

"We Can Save Manhattan"

Fictional biography of Victor Justin Merit, an upper-middle-class Black man living in New York City.

Handwritten draft, pp. 1-372

b. 2 f. 22 pp. 1-201

b. 2 f. 23 pp. 202-302

b. 2 f. 24 pp. 303-372

Writings (cont.)

Fiction (cont.)

"We Can Save Manhattan" (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 1 Typescript draft, pp. 1-53
Typescript draft pages, incomplete
- b. 3 f. 2 Outline, prologue, unnumbered pages
- b. 3 f. 3 pp. 8-199, incomplete
- b. 3 f. 4 pp. 200-535, incomplete
- b. 3 f. 5 Miscellaneous Drafts and Fragments

Drama

- b. 3 f. 6 "Ruins," "The Old Fellow," and "Lap Dance"
- b. 3 f. 7 "Thanksgiving"

Nonfiction 1983-2006

- b. 3 f. 8 **Black Avant-Garde discussion 1985**
Transcript of discussion led by Johnson at St. Marks Church on May 21, 1985, featuring Al Simon, Ed Clark, and Steve Cannon.
- b. 3 f. 9 **Book proposal re: Black masculinity**
With related notes and news clippings.
- b. 3 f. 10 *Notes on The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and Black Picture Show*
With a few photocopied articles on Gertrude Stein.
- b. 3 f. 11 **Notes on Black Poets**
Includes notes on James W. Thompson, David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, and Ishmael Reed.
- b. 3 f. 12 **Notes on Hip Hop 2006**
- b. 3 f. 13 **"The Umbra Workshop: Its Influence on Selected Black Poets"**
With photocopy of *Kerista* and related research material
- b. 3 f. 14 **Michel Oren interview of Askia Touré 1983-1984**
With letter from Oren to Johnson, dated June 22, 1984.
- b. 3 f. 15 **Michel Oren interview of Art Berger**

b. 3 f. 16-22 **Notebooks 1985-2018**

b. 4 f. 1-4

Johnson's notebooks--which include reporter's notebooks, exercise books, and legal pads--contain a mix of poetry and writing drafts, journals and personal notes, and various ideas and fragments. Most are undated.

Personal and Professional Files 1961-1991

- b. 4 f. 5 **Biographical/Personal 1985-2017**
Includes a resume, certificates, financial records, receipts, and a calendar printout for September 2017.
- b. 4 f. 6 **Correspondence 1962-1998**
Includes several letters from Johnson writing in his capacity as editor of the student publication *Incident* (1962), a letter from Johnson to Askia [Touré] (undated), a letter from Tom [Dent] (1982), and a letter from the Downtown Rifle and Pistol Club (1998).
- b. 4 f. 7 **Columbia University 1990-1991**
- b. 4 f. 8 **Hunter College NAACP Charter Application 1961**
- b. 4 f. 9 **Ramapo College Promotion File 1977-1983**
- b. 4 f. 10 **Reed, Cannon & Johnson Communications 1973-1986**
- b. 4 f. 11-12 **Teaching notes 1974**
- b. 4 f. 13 **"The Challenges We Face" Third New York City Conference on Adult Basic Education, Bank Street College of Education 1982**

Printed Matter 1963-2004

Printed Matter (cont.)

- b. 4 f. 14 **Poetry Reading Flyers 1976-1986**
- b. 4 f. 15 **Press Clippings 1965-1982**
Includes two articles by Johnson in *Harlem Daily* (1965), a review of *Yardbird Reader* (1973) in *The Nation*, and various articles about Ramapo College, particularly Johnson's "Introduction to Popular and Underground Culture" class.
- b. 4 f. 16 **Prints 1979-1985**
Art prints by Chip Elwell, one featuring poetry by Johnson. With *The Print Collector's Newsletter* (vol. x no. 4), which mentions Elwell.
- b. 4 f. 17 ***Black Creation* 1971-1972**
Vol. 3, no. 1 (Fall 1971) issue contains "Searchin," a novel excerpt by Johnson; Vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 1972) contains an interview by Johnson of William Demby.
- b. 4 f. 18 ***Freedomways* 1984**
Vol. 24, no. 3, contains Michel Oren's article on Umbra.
- b. 4 f. 19 ***Umbra* 1963-1968**
Umbra number 2 (1963) and *Umbra Anthology 1967-1968*.
- b. 4 f. 20 ***Re:creation by Nikki Giovanni* 1981**
First published 1970, Broadside Press.
- b. 4 f. 21 ***Varied Colors by Dorothy Lee Solomon Good* 1974**
Includes a poem dedicated to Johnson.
- b. 4 f. 22 ***Felix of the Silent Forest by David Henderson* 1967**
Introduction by LeRoi Jones. Published by The Poets Press.
- b. 4 f. 23 ***Issues Beyond Democracy by Robert Hennelly and Barry Thomas* 1985**
Inscribed to Johnson from the authors.
- b. 4 f. 24 ***The Coming of Chronos to the House of Nightsong by Calvin C. Hernton* 1964**
Inscribed to Johnson from the author. Published by Interim Books.
- b. 4 f. 25 ***Golden Sardine by Bob Kaufman* 1969**
City Lights Books, Pocket Poets Series Number Twenty-One. Annotated by Johnson.
- b. 4 f. 26 ***Hudson (1-16) by Harry Lewis* 1981**
Inscribed to Johnson by the author, 1990. "*Hudson* is a special unnumbered issue of #MAGAZINE."
- b. 4 f. 27 ***Paradise Lost by John Milton* 2004**
Oxford University Press edition. Annotated by Johnson.