



THE LANDSCAPE OF MY ANCESTORS

IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN GREEN

Jonathan Green is an artist and a partner in the Lowcountry Rice Culture Project. A native of the South Carolina coast, near Beaufort, he now lives and paints in Charleston. At the Southern Foodways Symposium, Green spoke with poet Kevin Young about his grandfather's moonshining. The following is an excerpt from SFA oral historian Sara Wood's 2016 interview with Green.



Red Fish

MY GRANDMOTHER'S name was Eloise Stewart Johnson. She raised me personally. She literally took me from my mother, and she said, "This is my child," and she raised me because she believed in the signs and the prophecy of what

I would become. My grandmother and grandfather built their own home, and they built another structure next to it and it was used as a juke joint. She had her liquors license. She signed her name "E.S. Johnson," so people did not know she was a woman.

Paintings by Jonathan Green, courtesy of the artist

Anytime you look into my work and you see a simple A-frame house with a porch on it, that's my grandmother's house. It went through multiple changes over the years as the family grew. It got larger, you add a room here and you add a room there, and the color changed from time to time.

Our house was also a stop-off house. It was one of those places, because African Americans could not stay in motels and hotels. When guests came through, everyone had to give up their sleeping space, and we slept out in the yard or on the porch, most likely on the porch. The entire house would be offered to the guests that would stop through so they could get a bath, good meal, good night's sleep, and they would usually leave first thing the next morning.

[The nightclub] was called Sahan's Place. Many of the enslaved Africans were Muslims, and her name came from her Muslim culture. Black people remember and retain lots of names. They may not always know what it meant, but they can remember the sounds of it, and that's a way of holding on to their culture. So her nickname was "Sahan."

She probably opened in the late thirties, so she probably had it about fifteen, twenty years.

With my grandmother in the nightclub, I loved being there. She used to put me up on the bar. The earliest memory I had of being in the nightclub, this probably was about 195—I was born in '55, so it must have been around '58. I can

remember her picking me up—only had my diaper on—putting me on the bar, putting a quarter shot in my hand, and pointed to the person. And I would walk on the bar. And the joy was that I did not spill a drop, because I had good balance, coordination, you know, from drawing and all that stuff. And I would take it over to them, put it down, and as I put it on the bar and when I heard the tap of it on the bar without spilling a drop,

I WOULD WALK ON THE BAR, TAKE THE QUARTER SHOT TO THE CUSTOMER, AND PUT IT DOWN WITHOUT SPILLING A DROP.

and they would put the coins in my hand. And I would fold my hand tightly, not to lose it or drop it, and walk back to my grandmother. She thought that was the greatest thing, so she had me working very early.

The interior of the bar was covered in newspaper. There was a belly-pot stove in the middle of the bar. I remember, seemingly for me as a kid, the most beautiful people, because people really took pride in dressing and grooming. I remember the smells, the smells of lilac and roses, and women would wash in flower water. They would put flower petals in the water. And also the smell of—I think it's called pomade. It's a hair oil. I was always fascinated with how people



groomed themselves, how women dressed and looked. I learned later about makeup and how women wore makeup, and about their relationships, their closeness with each other, with men.

There was a door that led with a narrow screened-in walkway that led to the house, and that was her way to get to the house, bring food, get to the house for whatever reason. My grandmother was always very clever; she had it elevated. She had a walkway from the nightclub to the house.

My mother would [carry food from the house to the club], and my aunts and whomever was around. My grandmother used that walkway to stash her cash, to check on what's going on in the house, see what's cooking, so she could let people know. She never ever believed in serving alcohol without having food.

My grandfather was probably one of the finest moonshiners in Beaufort County. Black people and white people would come to this nightclub for moonshine. You know, alcohol never discriminates. I would remember her always saying, "Have you eaten?" to the people that were ordering moonshine or beer. She would also have prepared pigs' feet and pickled eggs and pickled okra, and she would have breads there available, always a big pot of soup. People would eat and feel great, and they would stay longer and buy more liquor. We had a big soup most often, with rice in it, with vegetables in it, with meat

in it, but it was always one big dish, one bowl.

[In 1959, when Hurricane Gracie hit South Carolina,] the home was not destroyed; only the nightclub. So I'm sure to her, that was a token of, "You need to move on with your life, do something else." And I think when that happened, she was probably in her forties.

I WENT TO THE ART INSTITUTE and first enrolled as a student-at-large in the fashion department, spent a half day in the fashion department. The fumes from the painting and the linseed oils from the painting department—I would never have enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago as an art, painting, and drawing student. I would have been too intimidated for that. But enrolling as a fashion design student allowed me access to that department, and I just followed my nose, and it led me up to the third floor and I never left. It was so natural when I sat down with pencil and paper and started drawing.

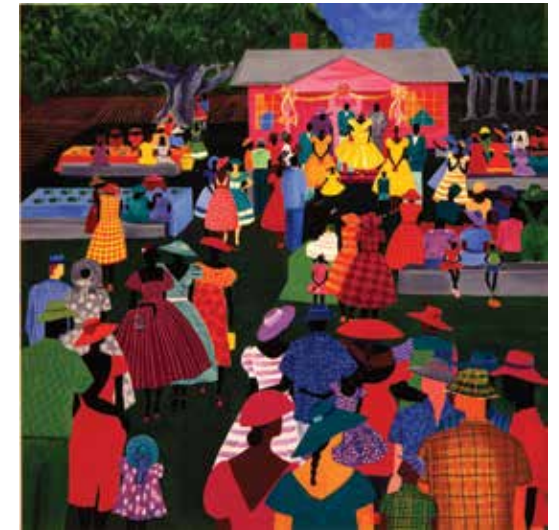
I was not thinking of being an African American artist. I did not think so much about feeling the need to portray my own culture and community. All I thought of was the incredible variety of artwork around me and that I wanted to fit in there somewhere.

Also I was very cognizant of the lack of imagery of people that looked like me, but it wasn't a complaint. I was just aware of it, and I think a part of that was being a security guard at the

museum. So I kind of made a self-imposed mission to be the person to help change that, and that's all I thought of. I didn't compare myself to anyone.

When I travel down Highway 17 and Highway 21, and I look out at the marshes and where those were once rice fields, I can almost see in the far, far distance my relatives working in the rice fields or just being the only seemingly black people on the planet, because it's such a huge expansive landscape of flatness, and you can see forever, seemingly. I know that I'm looking at the very same pictorial landscape, skyscape, waterscape, that my ancestors three hundred years looked at.

People need to be aware of the fact that when they come to the most beautiful, idyllic city in America—Charleston—how this city happened. The city was founded in 1640, and the earliest known rice planting was probably around 1670. That lasted well up into the Civil War with hundreds of thousands, millions of people working for hundreds of years, dying at very, very early ages, a culture of people that weren't even considered humans. But the infrastructure and work they did so that we can live this lifestyle and culture that we have today is astronomical. Not to know that, I think, is a disservice to any human being living in this area, in this environment, and that's the importance of it, so that we can have more conversations and dialogues about our history honestly, rather than



having dialogues about myths.

I think the most important role that art has is visual, but also beyond the visual is the audacity to ask the question, "What if?" What if we were brought here like Europeans were brought here? What if we had an opportunity to be a part of, to share, and to enjoy the wealth of the culture, not to be sidelined or neglected or passed over? What if the beauty of African culture and the humanity of African culture was synonymous to Europe from the onset of America? What if we could have all come together on this land and appreciate the Native Indians of this land? What if we could have all just come together and appreciated the different cultures and been able to work together and to love together? And we would have created what we are inching to, which is a completely new civilization and culture of people. 🍷

The Reception