

Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South. By E. Patrick Johnson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 584 pp.

In his book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson conducts interviews with sixty-three Black gay men in the southern region of the United States. Their ages ranged from 19 to 93, and interviews were conducted in every southern state, including Missouri, Oklahoma, and Washington, D.C. The author employs intersectionality, analyzing categories of race, gender, sexuality, region, and religion to illustrate the ways in which these men negotiate, live, and build communities in an ultra-conservative area of the country. Uninterested in providing an historical narrative, Johnson relies on critical performance ethnography as his major methodological approach, using oral histories of the Black gay men he interviewed. Johnson paid close attention to every aspect of the interactions with his interviewees, employing the senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight to the cultural spaces he occupied, which he contends is “also part of the southern way” (8). The author claims that his approach allows for honesty and self-reflexivity, and he is critical and remains aware of his privileged position in these encounters. He found his interviewees through word-of-mouth, rather than relying on the Internet, which potentially could have given incorrect intentions of his project. Additionally, many men did not disclose their real names, or asked that their names not be revealed in the book, due to their struggles with identity, consideration of their family’s feelings, and other various personal reasons.

In chapter 1, “Some Bitter and Some Sweet: Growing up Black and Gay in the South,” Johnson notes that all of the interviewees overwhelmingly stated that they experienced racism in varied ways throughout their lives. He focuses on four themes in this chapter, which include parenting and family dramas, education, racism and segregation, and gay members of the community. He points to the ways these men’s stories of parenting and family offer contradictions, conflict, and complications and often oppose negative stereotypes of Black families. Interviewees discuss their varied opportunities and experiences in education, which often include stories of segregation and integration. Johnson contests the notion that Black communities are more homophobic than White society, noting that institutional power dynamics disallow this paradigm. Interviewees also discuss gay members of their respective communities, pointing to the complicated ways homosexuality was simultaneously incorporated, ostracized, and respected during their lives.

In chapter 2, “Coming Out and Turning the Closet Inside Out,” Johnson analyzes the “closet” as a trope, a device that Black gay men of the U. S. South use to please their families, communities, and others. Some embrace the metaphoric closet as it serves as a safe haven, protecting them from hate, discrimination, and abuse. But some of the narrators reject the closet and face various consequences for being openly gay and Black in arguably the most conservative region of the country. The narrators of this chapter tell their stories of “coming out.” For many of the narrators, coming out was a difficult thing to do, and each man came out in his own unique way. Some of the narrators claim that their desires and happiness had to be more important than social consequences, as it had not in the past. Some of the men never use the term gay to describe themselves or address the topic; one narrator in particular was asked (in regards to his homosexual identity), “Is it true?” This indicates that the subject of homosexuality was so taboo that the word could not be used to address it despite it being a valid issue, or that even though it was something that affected the entire family, it could not be exposed. Whether it was through a letter, a conversation, or exposure by an incident, these men came out to their families for a

reason. They came out because they had accepted that they were sexually attracted to other men and felt that it was important for their families to know. And although some of their coming out experiences did not turn out the way they had expected, for many it provided a sense of liberation.

In chapter 3, “Church Sissies: Gayness and the Black Church,” Johnson explores the contradictions within the Black church, specifically as they relate to homosexuality. In the Bible, homosexuality is described as an abomination. But specifically in the Black church, homosexuality is demonized, arguably to a greater extent by African-American pastors than by their counterparts in predominantly White churches. The stigma of hyper-masculinity and heterosexism/homophobia attached to Black men is problematic and contributes to the demonization of homosexuality. In contrast, other sins and abominations are not addressed and demonized as frequently and not in the same way as homosexuality. Narrators in this chapter acknowledge the fact that homophobia exists within the Black church, but they also admit that they remain members of the congregation regardless of this recognition. The Black church has always been an institution of empowerment for the Black community. Thus, many people dare not challenge or even critique its shortcomings. However, the narrators of this chapter make it very clear that there is hypocrisy in the Black church. It is especially evident that underneath the heterosexism and homophobia, there is hidden or closeted homosexuality. When some of the narrators came out to their parents and other family members, they received responses such as, “You know what the Bible says about this!” But ironically, narrators reveal that some of the same men who preached the Word (the Holy Bible) were men who were engaging in homosexual acts. One narrator in particular even told his story of having oral sex with the assistant pastor of the church. Though many Black churches of the South were said to have this type of hypocrisy, there were also a few narrators who attended churches that affirmed homosexuality.

In chapter 4, “Do You Get Down? Homosexuals in the South,” Johnson dispels the misconception that all homosexual activity in the South is on the “down low.” Johnson accomplishes this by detailing the ways in which the narrators of *Sweet Tea* engage in same-sex sexual activity openly and unabashedly. This chapter consists of five categories, including first-time experiences, later sexual experiences, sex at historically Black colleges, sex in the military, and HIV/AIDS. Johnson notes that the narrators’ sexual encounters, which were often first-time sexual experiences, sometimes occurred in the Black church and among other spaces in the region; the narrators also tell stories of being coerced into sex. Testimonies of later sexual experiences often dispel the notion that the rural South is “sexually slow” (276). *Sweet Tea*’s narratives also showcase Black gay men from communities at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Johnson includes stories of Black gay men in the military and details the ways in which queer communities develop and function within these spaces. Johnson also interrogates HIV/AIDS and the ways it affects homosexuals in the South.

In chapter 5, “Trannies, Transvestites, and Drag Queens: Oh My! Transitioning the South,” Johnson examines the ways in which drag culture and trans-identities are received in the South. Oftentimes in the South, sexual and gender non-normativity are unseen, and sexual subcultures are unacceptable. This may cause some to believe that non-normative sexual activity or subcultures do not exist within the region. However, the narrators of *Sweet Tea* dispel this notion and claim that there are various ways in which sexual subcultures, particularly Black gay men, negotiate their sexual identities within this cultural space. Johnson notes that individuals

who belong to non-normative gender/sexual groups or subcultures encounter oppression, specifically homophobia, transphobia, and gender discrimination.

In chapter 6, "Sweet Magnolias: Love and Relationships," Johnson examines how Black gay men seek to be in long-term, monogamous relationships, which dispels the stereotype of promiscuity among gay men. "The rhetoric of gay promiscuity, however, has often been a tool used by a homophobic society to justify institutionalized discrimination" (430). The narrators detail how they negotiate cultural space, racial expectations, and family dynamics in order to have healthy relationships with their partners. Many of the narrators noted that regional difference played a role in the longevity of their relationships; however, some of them did not see living in the South as a hindrance to their relationships.

In chapter 7, "Of Legends and Young'uns: Black Gay Men across Generations," Johnson studies the lives of two elderly Black gay men and those of two Black gay men in their twenties. The men's age differences allow Johnson to contrast their generations and upbringings. Johnson recognizes a progression of regional attitudes toward Black gay men that suggests that the South has more "tolerance" for homosexuality and gender non-normativity. This positive change in societal responses to homosexuality allows Black gay men to live more openly and freely. However, it is noted that across generations there have been various forms of oppression that have affected Black gay men based on their racial and sexual identities. Black gay men were often invisible in the past, whereas they are stigmatized and marginalized for being visible in the present.

E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* is an insightful ethnographic narrative that details the lives of Black gay men in the U. S. South. These men have often been invisible and made to keep their stories a secret because of the consequences that come with being Black and gay in the South. Oddly, Black lesbians are not included in this study. Although Johnson begins by noting that the project exclusively focuses on Black gay men, it also would have been interesting to read about the experiences of Black lesbians in the South and how their stories contribute to the topic of regional experiences based on the intersection of race and sexuality. Still, Johnson's book thoroughly examines Black gay men in this particular cultural and regional space and reveals the experiences of an oppressed group that has typically been silenced for one reason or another.

Walter Tucker IV
Indiana University, Bloomington