

Transcript of Interview with Thenji Nkosi, March 22, 2007. 4pm-5pm. Language Resource Center, International Affair Building.

Time	Eckson	Thenji
00:00	Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you moved to the neighborhood.	So I am a person of mixed race, mixed ethnicity. My father is Zulu and my mother is Greek, but Greek American. My father is South African. And my roommate is Surinamese and Belarusian. So, I would visit him on the Westside, we kind of blended in and people would speak Spanish to us all the time because we are both shaded brown. But....
00:49	Hoping that you would understand Spanish?	
00:52	No Spanish!	Hoping that we would understand. My roommate speaks more than I do, but we, I don't speak much at all. Virtually nothing. No Spanish! But when we, I remember the day we looked, we looked at a lot of apartments in East Harlem.
	Together?	Ya. In Spanish Harlem. Together. And then we found this apartment further west than we had been looking previously. And I remember after we came out from looking at the apartment we were standing in the corner, I think of Lenox and 125 <sup>th</sup> . We kind of, both of us were commenting on the fact that we were the lightest people (laughter) my roommate said, "now we are about to live around some REAL Black people."
	Laughs	
01:56	Real Black people?	Real black people. You know. Not Dominicans or... He meant Black Americans, African Americans.
02:12	Right, right, but do you find some other "people" in your neighborhood?	We definitely do and I think that was just, you know, a comment that he was making to kind of contrast his neighborhood and kind of contrast the fact that we were "standing out" in the neighborhood.
02:33	Did you, like, I mean when you finally moved to the neighborhood, did you feel like you were actually "standing out" and the people were noticing it?	02:41 I don't know if I felt like the people were noticing, but as much as I noticed it, I did notice on my walk home I would often be the lightest person that I would see. Once in a while I would see a White person.

30

211

215

216

212

213

57

214

217

218

03:03 There are some White people as well?

03:05

Ya. So, my building is, I think is rent-controlled because our rent is fairly low. There are lots of families in our building. Maybe almost half of the building is from Muskrat which is funny because our superintendent is from there. And he has lived in the building for a number of years. It's gonna be almost fifteen years. So he has all his cousins and family living in the building as well. But there also other people, there are few Latino people in the building and then some African Americans. And I think there are three White people living in the building.

04:03 Oh! Really?

Out of 20-something, 24 apartments.

04:10 Right, eheh. But in terms of interactions between the people that you live with, and in terms of your own interactions with the people and how they sort of respond.

Within the building?

4:21 Right, and within the neighborhood in general.

Well, within the neighborhood, I can say, well, when I engage in conversation with the people in the neighborhood and they wanna know who I am, if I say I am from South Africa they became very interested in the way that becomes a point of, like you know, the telling point of my identity for them. And I think of people who are immigrants that I interact with, that becomes a commonality between us; that we are from somewhere else. That maybe we prefer the place that we are from (laughter) more than the place where we are now.

Right.

04:30 So, in the final analysis there is something common between you that essentially identifies you with other people in the neighborhood. And that is the fact

2

219

220

221

222

223

that you all are sort of  
“immigrants” or  
something else. So  
there is like a common  
identity.

Eheh, ya.

04:49

04:49 Wow! That is so  
interesting, that’s so  
interesting. And like I  
indicated earlier on,  
we are interested in  
education here, and  
particularly education  
outside the traditional  
structures of the  
school and so forth. I  
mean, are there nay  
educational  
institutions, are there  
any institutions that  
you think are  
somehow providing  
some form of  
education? Are people  
going to school? What  
do you see as you  
walk around in  
relation to education?  
Whatever education is  
in this particular case.  
Because if you see  
people drumming that  
is another form of  
education.

06:48

Well, so, from the most obvious: we live across the  
street from a school-Harlem Renaissance School. I  
think it is P.S.... it is a public school. I don’t remember  
what number it is, but it is a school for “pregnant  
teens.” But it was James Baldwin’s alma mater school.  
That was his school. So I am not sure to what extent  
that is school is functioning or how. What I know, it  
doesn’t seem like it is open some days. I don’t really  
know what goes on in there, but I see kids hanging out  
on the street outside.

224

225

07:46 Pregnant teens? I haven't noticed anyone who looks particularly pregnant. But maybe that is because people have winter stuff on. But there are young women hanging out there. (Laughter). It seems fairly quiet, otherwise. I don't know what attendance is like over there.

226

08:08 That would be a very interesting thing to explore. And then there is the Schaumburg School which is across the street.

36

08:11 Is it another public school? Ya, and that seems like a primary school or a middle school. I don't see a lot of high students. But other than that, my street seems very quiet. It is very quiet, I don't see a lot of kids hanging out, you know, on the stoops or on the corner so much.

09:20 There is a rehab clinic that is also across the way from the ... there is three corners on 128 and Madison, kind of occupied by two schools and this rehab clinic.

195

09:37 A rehab for what? I think just drugs and alcohol. Ya, I mean, that is something that I have wondered about as well [that is] where kids congregate in our neighborhood. I have never been here over a summer so I think that would change my perception of things a little bit. There are a few parts in the neighborhood that are... there is a park in the neighborhood, there is one four, five blocs from my house on Madison but the times that I had been there it had been fairly quiet. I don't see too many kids hanging out there.

10:37 But I do note that there are some, I mean, there are definitely, community projects that kind of involve kids. One organization would be GARDENS ORGANIZATION it is run by, her name is Reverend Omega.

31

11:02 Community Gardens! Community Gardens, I don't know if that is the formal name. I talked to someone who is involved in the project. I think her name is Rev. Omega who kind of runs the project from one of the churches on 128<sup>th</sup> street. And that project, well, that organization has high

scholars.

11:48 That is interesting, it's kind of service oriented.

Ya. The kids have access to the gardens and they grow things. There is a free space for the people to grow things. And then one of the, I think it is a district leader, in my neighborhood, Mr. Holly, I do not know his first name. He lives just diagonally from my... on 128th street. He runs a children's gateway program Kids are taken out of the city on weekend excursions. He has asked me to get involved in that.

32

12:50 What is the nature of your involvement?

I haven't been involved just yet.

Are you going to do it? [get involved]

I think so. I think the school year draws to a close I will.

13:01 Are you sort of going to integrate your own work-filmmaking-with the excursions? Are you going to be taking some shots?

I am interested in teaching kids how to use cameras.

You can teach me too?

I should teach you too. I would love to teach kids how to edit as well. I think that such an amazing skill to have to be able to put together.... To express yourself with a camera is one thing but to use it in post-production is another.

13:44 Wonderful, wonderful, that is very helpful. In terms of people moving in and out of the neighborhood, when I walk around I see that a lot of buildings have been or are being renovated and some of them are being sold. What is your observation on that? Are people moving in, are people leaving the neighborhood? Are

there some big estate companies coming in, and are there some White people coming in and buying homes?

Well, when I started looking for an apartment in 2005, end of 2005, what was so striking to me was how many places were being renovated. How many in Harlem towards further west, how many of the apartments we visited were either new or newly renovated. It was interesting to me and I just noticed much work is being done in these neighborhoods.

35

14:51

On my street, for example, my street is not a good example because schools take up so much space. But at least two buildings are being worked on right now. If you go down, there is just so much work being done. I would say maybe almost half of the buildings between 125<sup>th</sup> and 129<sup>th</sup>, and between 5<sup>th</sup> Ave and between Madison are being renovated.

15:44 That is so interesting.

I think there is an influx of some young White, maybe they are Bohemians (laughter); and academics. I don't think Yuppies are moving in. So, Harlem, White Yuppies! I don't see too many, in two years I haven't seen too many White faces around. I definitely do see Japanese towards the West. I do see some young Japanese people. My roommate and I have both observed this kind of Japanese hipsters. They are into HIP-HOP CULTURE.

22

227

104

16:42

They are very trendy and I think there is a café on the corner of 126<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> called Boma, that opened just as we moved in. and since I walk pass it some time I see a lot of young black people with laptops working in there. So I think that there are young black professional s and students moving to those neighborhoods.

228

17:18 Right, that is interesting. Well thank you very much Thenji for taking your rime to talk to me. Now I have an idea of what really, in fact, if you talk about the institutions, just the

whole thing, it just  
helps me a lot.  
Because now I have to Thank you.  
go back to the  
neighborhood and try  
to figure out where  
these organizations are  
located.