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Narrator

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Interviewer

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West Bank Campus of the University of Minnesota

JW: I'm John Wright, faculty member for the last 35 years in the Departments of African American & African Studies and English.

RH: I'm Rob Hahn. I'll be asking the questions. Today is December 17, 2018, and we are on the campus, the West Bank of the University of Minnesota. Let me start out as basically as it comes. Tell me your first memory of Dinkytown.

JW: I came to the University as a freshman in the fall of 1963. I'd had no experience of Dinkytown before that, and it was an entirely new kind of space for me--clearly associated with the campus world. It was really exciting. Commercial districts with a lot of the arts-oriented music and books and street life that I found new and exciting. For me, it was a place where I had lunch regularly, where I went to to meet friends and socialize, and also to party. Later on, I would live in the Dinkytown area as a student in several apartments in the Dinkytown and West Bank districts.

RH: What was it about that time--someone called it the heyday of Dinkytown--that gave it so much character? Made it so alive?

JW: Well, in those years, of course it was in the midst of the 1960s upsurge in terms of youth rebellion, student protests, the energies from the counterculture, and also from Civil Rights and the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. The mix of all these things came through student life and campus life, and flowed into Dinkytown, where oftentimes things that weren't being dealt with in the classrooms got a chance to mix and ferment in a freer, more open atmosphere.

RH: You had a one-sentence statement when we last spoke, or when we met previously, and I want you to elaborate on it as it pertains to Dinkytown, and maybe the campus on the whole. You said, "The paradigm of social protest changed." How so?

JW: The Vietnam War had a significant part to do with that, and the convergence of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. And in particular, again, in the mid-'60s with the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power. That brought a whole new dynamic, an increasingly radical dynamic, to the politics on the campus and, again, to the politics of the counterculture during those years.

RH: You alluded to, you said there was that Bohemian dimension to that.

JW: Yes. Some folks always thought about Dinkytown as a kind of midwestern Greenwich Village. Of course on scale, we didn't compare with Greenwich Village at all. But there was, again, a kind of New York Bohemian counterculture lifestyle. Coffee houses and shops and late-night music and sometimes psychedelic parties. And of course the growing rebellion against the older generation's sexual mores. The mix of alcohol and illicit drugs and open sexuality, as well,

became part of that heady process of confronting and defying the larger society. Also, we were trying to chart some new ways to imagined futures.

RH: How did you dress back in the day?

JW: I guess at the height of those years, I was wearing wildly-colored bell bottoms and flowery shirts and leather, Big Apple hats and African dashikis and Kufus. At the time, I had a large Afro and long, wide sideburns, so I guess I fit well into that kind of eclectic mix. It was a convergence, again, of the emerging counterculture of the time, and African American cultural nationalism in the Black Arts and the influx of influences from African American cultural corridors local and national--from the classic soul music of the era to funk and free jazz. That became a part of the milieu that spread into cuisine and to costuming and all the rest.

RH: How did the different backgrounds, be it race related or culturally related, get together and interact with each other in Dinkytown?

JW: In the coffee house contexts or on the street corner, because one of the features of the time was a lot of street corner activity, which sometimes involved artists setting up shop on the street corners or on sidewalks hawking their works, talking and conversing with passers-by and potential buyers for their creative enterprises. All that contributed to, I think, pretty free and open exchanges from a variety of different cultural and national backgrounds. All that was really exciting.

RH: You used a term when we talked previously—"wigger." How would you define that?

JW: "Wigger," of course, is short for "white n***r," to use the pejorative. But the term, that concept, had been framed in the late 1950s in Normal Mailer's famous essay "The White Negro," which dramatized the then "New Wave" rebellion against traditional social mores, and coined the idea of the cross-racial hipster and hip-ness as a model for cultural rebellion in the white world. It became a point of connection that in part indicated the extent to which African American lifestyles, attitudes, music, ways of talking, walking, dancing, and moving were affecting the larger society and personal identities.

So "wigger" is one of a long series of terms that have addressed this symbiotic relationship between African American stylistic sensibilities and the larger society--a relation that goes back into the 19th century. Back then 19th century "Bohemians" and countercultural types like Walt Whitman were saying as early as the 1850s that the new American "opera" would most likely be found on the lips and in the music of slaves. "Wigger" reflects that whole history about these alternative ways of thinking about American culture--particularly about bourgeois American culture. So African Americans serving as a countercultural point of vernacular reference has a long history.

RH: Do you remember the protest at the ROTC building? Either the day of or the day after the Kent State killings?

JW: Yes. I, in fact, had a short stint in Air Force ROTC in that old Armory building on campus. But I didn't last more than a quarter in the Air Force ROTC at the time--too many points of conflict between my way and the military way; so I was very familiar with that protest and those events. Because The Armory and the other local military recruiting offices--and there were several of them on campus during those days--became staging points for student protests.

RH: Let's talk about some of the characters and some of the locations in Dinkytown to get your thoughts and memories about them. Starting with "Walking Phil"-- Phil Holland.

JW: Phil Holland became a Dinkytown legend during the years that he was on the scene. He lived in the area, moved around in a variety of rooming houses. His origin has always remained a bit of a mystery and there were a lot of legends and stories about Phil Holland, who we called "Walking Phil" because he covered the campus and much of the downtown metro on foot, day and night. But Phil was a very stately, dignified, tall, lean brother who had come from the Deep South. Most of the stories that I heard, or that I recall Phil relating in person, had him coming here from Atlanta, or somewhere near Atlanta.

One of the big Southern cities at any rate; and he somehow ended up in Minnesota in the campus area. There were stories that he had gone to St. John's up in Collegeville or one or another school here locally. There were also tales that he'd had a brief career as a professional or semi-pro baseball player. He rarely ever wanted to give much detail about his personal background, but he could give you tremendous detail about almost anything else. He was a tremendous conversationalist and could talk in a very knowledgeable way about a wide array of academic or pop subjects from business and economics to politics to culture and art and sexuality and so on. Phil was one of the very memorable figures who was around Dinkytown for years.

RH: And fairly dapper the way I hear it.

JW: Very dapper, yes. Most often in his heyday, he was usually wearing a suit a grey or pinstriped grey suit. Sometimes a blazer. With the passage of time, that changed and he wasn't quite as debonair later on as he was in the earlier years, in his heyday.

RH: Some people I've talked to have suggested that maybe he was a little "off" from a psychological standpoint.

JW: Yes but I don't think that from a clinical standpoint Phil would be profiled as being in any way psychologically dangerous or dysfunctional—though he was involved in at least a couple of tussles around Dinkytown. But, yes, there was a point at which his relationship to reality became a bit fuzzy. That would come up periodically in the way he talked. He could carry on very coherent, extended conversations about complex subjects with great ease and then veer off in sometimes strange directions. But, yes, there was something about Phil that, I think, made it difficult for him to fit unproblematically into the larger society. Because the atmosphere in Dinkytown and around the campus provided a more free-floating kind of social world, in that kind of context he could operate without any major obstacles.

RH: Another character that you told me about and I hope you'll elaborate here, Anthony A. Nelson.

JW: Anthony A. Nelson. Tony Nelson was another one of the brothers who moved back and forth between the campus arena and the Minneapolis North Side and South Side and in St. Paul. He was a poet, a freelance poet. A large, dark-skinned, broad-smiling brother who had one leg, but who didn't allow his one-leggedness to constrict in any way either his poetry or his relationships with people in the Dinkytown and campus area.

He published his poems independently and hawked them around Dinkytown and on campus at the student union and elsewhere. Most of them were what you'd call broadsides, occasional poems, or poems dedicated to particular individuals, or to self-exploration. He published them in typescript pamphlets, essentially, that were produced by his own publishing company--himself.

Some sported an address down on Lake Street. One of them I can recall was called *Ballads for Small Time Losers*; but there were several others.

Characteristically, in the opening pages of the pamphlets, Tony had long lists of all the people who had either bought (or promised to buy) a copy of the poems or who were his friends or associates or supporters. Many of the pieces reflected the lyrical or meditative poetry that fused current personal or political concerns with the styles of the older generation of Beat poets' work. He was quite familiar with the Ginsbergs and Ferlinghettis and Kerouacs etcetera at the time. But also, it reflected what was being called the New Black Poetry that was emerging then in the context of the Black Arts Movement. In that sense, Tony's poems were a local manifestation of the Black Arts and their intersection here with the counterculture and the Bohemian side of campus life.

RH: I think you told me that, maybe it was a mutual relationship—the young ladies liked him quite a bit.

JW: Yes. He had a particular verve for dealing with male/ female relationships and sexuality and sensuality. I think his way of addressing male/ female relationships struck a particular chord with many of the young women on campus—particularly young white women—who became some of his more ardent supporters and purchasers and distributors of his poetry collections.

RH: Another well-known individual in Dinkytown in the day was Melvin McCosh of McCosh's Books.

JW: McCosh. Of course there were several bookstores, the old bibliophile-owned bookstores then. McCosh, I think, became the best known of those old-line bookstore owners. His bookstore became a real hangout, and McCosh himself was enormously learned and erudite in terms of the book world. If you came in and asked him about any particular topic, he could immediately not just lead you to books that he had on hand, but point you towards titles he didn't own that you should think about. Melvin was a really pivotal character in the Dinkytown scene in those years.

RH: Were you aware of or even involved in the little sit-in at Bridgeman's that was done on his behalf when they wanted to expand Bridgeman's and get rid of McCosh's Books?

JW: I was very much aware of it. I wasn't directly involved in the Bridgeman's protest, but that-- like two or three other protests that took place in Dinkytown in those years—involved corporate chain enterprises trying to displace some of the traditional small-shop owners, whether they were bookstore owners or restaurateurs or coffee house owners. They became causes célèbre for the Dinkytown aficionados and campus students. Melvin McCosh and the protest against Bridgeman's were a part of an attempt to try to keep Dinkytown from going over into the hands of the corporate merchandisers.

RH: And one of the more famous ones, if not most famous was the protest over the Red Barn.

JW: Yes. Absolutely.

RH: Let's talk about the bookstores. We talked a little bit about the bookstores. The coffee shops. I think you said it was in the coffee shops, or maybe in a different location, where you honed your skill playing pool.

JW: Well, there weren't any full-size pocket billiard or billiard tables in Dinkytown then, but several of the restaurants and bars had small bar tables--six-foot or seven-foot tables (instead of the regulation size eight-foot tables) where students played and gambled on eight-ball and nine-

ball games. I was part of that enterprise, but I did most of my pool playing in Coffman Union in the pool room at the east end of the Union during those years, where you had full-sized regulation tables, both pocket billiards and billiards tables, as well as snooker tables. I won the University pocket billiards championship four times during my years on campus, at a time long before the advent of video games, when the public luster around the Paul Newman (“Fast Eddie”)-Jackie Gleason (“Minnesota Fats”) film, *The Hustler*, was still strong and when the Brunswick Corporation—the leading national manufacturer of pool and billiards tables—regularly sent World Champion pool players around the country to campuses to play the college champs in open exhibitions. So I got to play the legendary Willie Mosconi—the greatest pool player of all time, and who did all the trick shots in *The Hustler*—twice in exhibition at Coffman, plus Joe Balsis after he’d won the World Championship, as well as the Women’s U.S. Champion. The group that played there in the student union often spilled over into the Dinkytown clubs and bars; and they became an alternate arena for playing pool and hustling. So I spent a lot of evenings into the late night playing pool on the bar tables in Dinkytown.

RH: What are your memories of Al’s Breakfast?

JW: Al’s Breakfast had marvelous breakfast food, but you couldn’t get into Al’s because there was almost always a long line, unless you went at some very strange hour to try to get in. Once you did get in, you could hardly turn around. Al and the waiters and waitresses behind the bar were in frantic motion almost all the time. But it was a marvelous eat-and-greet spot if you could get into Al’s. And of course, it had been an institution there for so long that it was hard to go to Dinkytown and not at least try to get a peek into Al’s Breakfast. Most often I would get into Al’s very early in the morning after a night out, one way or the other, and get there before the regular morning crowd got in.

RH: What about Mama D’s? Did you spend much time eating there?

JW: Yes, a lot of time in Mama D’s and Vescio’s. They made great pizza. Had really flavorful, spicy food and the Italian fare, I guess, brought out my inclinations towards Italian food. Perhaps even more than the pizza, I loved the Italian sausage and peppers dishes and entrees that they had on the menus there at Mama D’s and at Vescio’s.

RH: You told me some of your thoughts and memories of the street corner musicians. Did people just pull out their instrument or open their case and start playing?

JW: I think some of the street corner musicians were, in fact, students who were enrolled in the School of Music here and were trying to make a few bucks or to hone their craft by sitting on the street corners in Dinkytown and playing violins or guitars or wind instruments or whatever, and drawing crowds and attracting a few dollars in the process. Many of them were University music students. But some of them were itinerant musicians from around town who saw the Dinkytown scene as one place where they could come and perhaps pick up a few bucks in the course of a day.

RH: You may have said this. Maybe I didn’t hear. Did Anthony A. Nelson recite poetry on the street corner?

JW: Rarely, if ever.

RH: Okay. Let me just go over some notes here. We covered most of these. What about memories of The Scholar?

JW: Well, The Scholar was of course famous in part because of Dylan's time there as a student and musician. But it had a great coffee house atmosphere. It was undeniably dingy in many ways, and the owners made no effort to make it look chic or modern, but that was part of the coffee house ethos of those years. I didn't go to The Scholar much for the coffee. I wasn't a coffee drinker. But the food, the sandwiches, and the music, those were the primary draws of The Scholar. The crowd was the same kind of campus Bohemian crowd that was part of Dinkytown's appeal to young folks who were exploring the possibilities of life and politics and love and all the rest one way or another.

RH: What sort of music did you like back in the day?

JW: I'm a product of the generation of Classic Soul and R&B. The early '60s music and the Motown scene was central for me. So The Miracles and The Impressions and Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye, and the Drifters and Ray Charles and all the rest. Plus the emergence of funk and free jazz. The music of James Brown and Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, and so forth, but also some of the experimental free-jazz groups. There were a number of free-jazz musicians and ensembles who worked the music scene here in the Twin Cities. Some of them were imports from Chicago, as was the case with the blues.

I was a heavy blues aficionado. Then there were a number of blues clubs in the area over here. Probably the best known to emerge was probably The Cabooze. But Archie Bunker's later on, Wilebski's and so forth. They were not in Dinkytown proper, but the spillover from those joints filtered into Dinkytown; and again, the influx of Chicago blues and jazz musicians who played oftentimes in such places made them part of the Dinkytown orbit.

RH: When you compare Dinkytown today to the time you spent there in the '60s and early '70s, how would you describe change and what has been lost?

JW: Most of the places in Dinkytown now are part of chain operations and are decidedly corporate--at least many of them certainly are. There are still some small boutiques; but the shopping is pretty limited. The biggest losses are the bookstores and the associated styles of reading and talking. I think, after Larry Dingman left, Kristen's Book House is the last survivor of the old bookstore scene in Dinkytown. We do have bars that have some coffee house dimension to them, and there is some live music in places like the Loring Bar & Café in the old Gray's Drugs building, but the mix of those forms, of the visual arts, the painters and poets and musicians and street folk who were part of the old Dinkytown scene, that combination simply doesn't exist in today's Dinkytown.

RH: What impact did living in and interacting in Dinkytown, as you look back, have on your life as you know it today?

JW: I think for me, because I, like many of my peers, was wrestling with social values, political values, and so on, and it was a mix of competing ideas and values and lifestyles that were on display in Dinkytown--that gave me a broader sense of possibilities in terms of the kind of choices that I made about life and living. But I was also moving back and forth between Dinkytown and the African American communities in the Twin Cities here: on the North Side and the old Plymouth Avenue scene in those years of the 1960s, and the Rondo District in St. Paul with its shops, community centers, and South Minneapolis.

So Dinkytown was part of a cluster of discrete communities that I circulated through. Dinkytown had its own distinctive flavor. Part of the mix was, in some ways, more international. Because in

this mix of artists and eccentrics, there were significant numbers of students and people from abroad.

One of the artists I remember from those years was a Zimbabwean / Rhodesian artist named Rex Mhiripiri who still owns a gallery of African art here in Minneapolis. He was one of the painters who regularly was on the scene in Dinkytown and who, to some extent, sold his work or exhibited his work either on the streets or in shops there. Bobby Biddle, Robert Biddle, was another African American artist who you saw in that terrain, and who also moved in the gallery world here locally, as well in African American communities. This cross current of cultural communities that Dinkytown had a big impact on me.

RH: A couple final things. I'm going to run a couple names past you. Tell me if you have any memories of them, or even knew them. Bill Tilton.

JW: I knew Bill Tilton quite well. Bill Tilton was part of the SDS organization and activities on campus, and heavily involved in radical politics, antiwar protests, etc. Art Himmelman, as I recall, was president of SDS when the Afro-American Action Committee, of which I was an executive committee member, reacted after the King assassination in the spring of '68 by developing a list of seven demands, which I actually drafted in the days following the assassination, and which we presented to University President Malcolm Moos. Eight months later, during the following January of 1969, the University's intransigence finally led us to take over the administration building, Morrill Hall. Bill Tilton, Art Himmelman, and SDS were important allies for us on that occasion, and they formed a protective ring around the building to minimize the potential conflict between some of the right-wing anti-takeover protestors who wanted to create visible, violent conflict out of what was designed to be a non-violent protest occupation reflecting the spirit of Dr. King.

RH: We interviewed Bill last week, and he, like you, has a real strong persona. How would you describe him back in the day?

JW: Bill was fiery and very committed, but he wasn't a natural orator and had other equally essential skills. He was obviously highly intelligent and strategically insightful, but there's a side of Bill that's very thoughtful particularly about what he says and how he interrelates with other people—whether they're on his side of issues or not. He was very effective, I think, as a communicator—and still is. In that regard, his commitments and his thinking and ideas were very critical in terms of the interchange that we had with SDS during those years.

RH: What am I forgetting to ask about that you would add with regard to Dinkytown?

JW: I think I mentioned the circle of parties that were also part of the social atmosphere surrounding Dinkytown. Because for many of us who lived in Dinkytown--I lived for a few years at the corner of 7th and 7th Street Southeast in an old three-story, ramshackle duplex--many of us got involved in parties that bridged some of the different cultural communities. One of the links, clearly, was with the world of the fraternities and sororities, and the parties like they had. That, I think, was a significant milieu also.

Sometimes you would go to Dinkytown to places like Vescio's and Mama D's and The Scholar, to make connections to parties. To find out what was going on and where, whether it was in fraternity or sorority houses, or in this apartment or that, or whether it was linked to the campus varsity athletes groups. In that sense, Dinkytown became a kind of staging ground for some of the late-night social activities and erotic adventuring.

RH: What about the development of, since you lived on 7th and 7th, the development of 35W and how it split Dinkytown in so many ways?

JW: Oh, boy. I'm trying to remember when 35W came through, because of course it cut (if you were northwest of 10th Street and the bridge that ran through there on 35W did) cut off part of old Dinkytown from that part that we now associate with the Hennepin Avenue turf. Now some folks refer to it as NoHo (a spin off from New York's SoHo) or whatever else--the Central and Hennepin Avenue corridor.

But also in those days, remember, the West Bank campus community didn't exist during the early '60s and mid '60s. The West Bank of the campus didn't emerge until the late 1960s and early 70s. The Cedar Riverside area was a kind of independent sector; but it had natural links to Dinkytown. Ofttimes you would circulate or cruise outside of Dinkytown over to the Cedar Riverside bars and restaurants. The places at Seven Corners, for instance, like the Mixers, Sgt. Preston's and the other establishments, most of which are now gone, became part of the same interconnecting campus orbit.

So Dinkytown and Seven Corners and Stadium Village constituted a kind of triangular set of campus-related communities that you moved through. They were in many ways, in our minds, closely integrated, because you could hop from one to the other. They all had their own distinct character and differences. In fact, regarding the West Bank, when I mentioned the Bohemian aspects of Dinkytown the West Bank area was called "Bohemian Flats" before the new Washington Avenue bridge was completed and the West Bank campus was built.

RH: When you think of Dinkytown today, what are your feelings? How would you characterize how you feel about it today?

JW: I still go to Dinkytown regularly. The places I'm most likely to go or be seen these days are Annie's Parlor, which still serves, in my mind, the best hamburgers in Dinkytown and is kind of a rustic survivor of that old Dinkytown scene. Annie's Parlor on the one hand, and what used to be Gray's Drug there on the corner of 4th and 14th and is now the Loring Bar & Café—with live music and dancing that suits my Old School tastes in blues, jazz, and salsa. I still stop in the Book House on occasion; and I inevitably end up at the Target Express for convenience shopping and a couple of the fast food operations—McDonalds, etc. for after hours indulgences.

RH: Varsity Theater? Do you ever go to any—

JW: Oh, yes. Used to go to the Varsity Theater once upon a time, when they screened films; but I haven't gone to the Varsity Theater for many, many years. Of course, the Varsity Theater in Dinkytown and the old Oak Street Cinema in Stadium Village were primary movie houses, small movie houses in those areas where we went oftentimes to see avant-garde and international cinema. I can remember sitting in, I think it was the Varsity, rather than the Oak Street Cinema, where I saw back in 1967 or '68, the film version of LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, which was a transfixing cinema experience for me, and where the world of black Bohemianism and the world of the wiggers came together in a highly dramatic and violently visceral way. The Varsity Theater in Dinkytown and the Oak Street Cinema in Stadium Village were where avant-garde international films were shown. They were places where the kinds of films and crowds that you didn't see elsewhere in the metro area congregated. You had a really heady mix of ideas, artistic attitudes, and the infusion of continental European attitudes and culture and art that at least sported a local manifestation. With the relocation of the old University Film Society to St. Anthony Main on the riverfront, that specific art scene has found new digs; but the roots trace back to Dinkytown.

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