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From Black Quare Studies or Almost Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother

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*from* **BLACK SQUARE STUDIES** or  
**Almost Everything I know about Queer  
Studies I learned from My Grandmother**

*by E. Patrick Johnson*

**Coda**

Because I credit my grandmother for passing on to me the little bit of commonsense I still have. I thought I would conclude this essay with a story about her employment of “gaydar” that speaks to how black folk use motherwit as a “reading” strategy, as well as to “forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (Zora Neale Hurston).

My grandmother lives in western North Carolina. When I went to live with her to collect her oral history for my dissertation, she spent a considerable amount of time catching me up on all of the new residents who had moved into her senior citizens’ community. Dressed in her customary polyester cut-off shorts and cotton makeshift blouse, loosely tied sheer scarf draped around her dyed, jet black hair, legs crossed and head cocked to the side, my grandmother described to me, one by one, each of the new residents, detailing, among other things, their medical histories and conditions, the number of children they had, their marital status and, perhaps most importantly, whether they were “pickles” or not. She uses the term euphemistically to describe people who she believes are “not quite right in the head.” There was one resident in particular, David, in whom my grandmother had a particular interest. I soon learned that David was a seventy-four year-old white man who had to walk with the support of a walker, and who had moved to my grandmother’s community from across town. But that was not the most important thing about David. My grandmother revealed to me what that was one day: “Well, you know we got one of them ‘homosexuals’ living down here,” she said, dryly. Not quite sure I had heard her correctly, but also afraid that I had, I responded with, “A what?” “You know, one of them ‘homosexuals’,” she said again just as dryly, but this time her voice was tinged with impatience and annoyance. Curious, a bit anxious about the turn the conversation was taking (I am not out to my grandmother), I stupidly pursued the issue further: “Well how do you know the man’s a homosexual, Grandmama?” She paused, rubbed her leg, narrowed her eyes and responded, “Well, he gardens, bakes pies, and keeps a clean house.” (She might not have gone to school, but she could most definitely READ!) Like a moth to the

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flame, I opened the door to my own closet for her to walk in and said, "Well, I cook and keep my apartment clean." Then, after a brief pause, "But I don't like gardening. I don't like getting my hands dirty." As soon as the words "came out" of my mouth, I realized what I had done. My grandmother said nothing. She simply folded her arms and began to rock as if in church. The question she dare not ask sat behind her averted eyes: "You ain't quare are you, Pat?" Yes, Grandmama. Quare, indeed.