

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Samuel Greenlee

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Greenlee, Sam, 1930-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee,
Dates:	November 1, 2001
Bulk Dates:	2001
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:31:21).
Abstract:	Fiction writer and poet Samuel Greenlee (1930 - 2014) began a seven-year career with the U.S. Information Agency as a foreign services officer in 1957 and was awarded the Meritorious Service Award for bravery during the Baghdad revolution in 1958. He was best known for his prize winning book, 'The Spook Who Sat by the Door,' which became an underground favorite for its fictionalization of an urban-based war for African American liberation. Greenlee was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 1, 2001, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_028
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Over the course of his career, Sam Greenlee has been a novelist, poet, screenwriter, journalist, teacher, and talk show host. Born in Chicago on July 13, 1930, he attended Chicago public schools. At age fifteen, Greenlee participated in his first sit-in and walked in his first picket line. His social activism continues to this day.

In 1952, Greenlee received his B.S. in political science from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and the following year he attended law school. Deciding against a law career, he transferred to the University of Chicago, studying international relations from 1954 to 1957. In 1957, he began a seven year career with United States Information Agency as a Foreign Services Officer, serving in Iraq, East Pakistan, Indonesia, and Greece, and in 1958, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Award for bravery during the Baghdad revolution.

Greenlee's first and most well known novel, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, was published in 1968. This prize-winning novel quickly became an underground favorite for its fictionalization of an urban-based war for African American liberation. Greenlee co-wrote a screenplay adaptation of the novel, and in 1973 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* was released on film. The film was an overnight success when it was released and was then unexpectedly taken out of distribution.

Greenlee has written numerous novels, stage plays, screenplays, poems. He recently moved back to Chicago after several years of voluntary exile in Spain and West Africa and is currently hosting a radio talk show program.

Sam Greenlee passed away on May 19, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Samuel Greenlee was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on November 1, 2001, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer and poet Samuel Greenlee (1930 - 2014) began a seven-year career with the U.S. Information Agency as a foreign services officer in 1957 and was awarded the Meritorious Service Award for bravery during the Baghdad revolution in 1958. He was best known for his prize winning book, 'The Spook Who Sat by the Door,' which became an underground favorite for its fictionalization of an urban-based war for African American liberation.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Greenlee, Sam, 1930-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Greenlee, Sam, 1930- --Interviews

Authors and publishers--Interviews,

African American political activists--Illinois--Interviews,

African American civil rights workers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews,

Rural-urban migration--United States,

Racially mixed people--Interviews,

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs

Hansberry, Lorraine, 1930-1965

Discrimination in employment

United States--Army--African Americans--Social conditions--20th century

United States Information Service

United States--Foreign relations--Middle East

Motion pictures--Censorship--United States

Hatcher, Richard G., 1933-

Americans--Foreign countries--Interviews

African American literature

American literature--African American authors--Interviews

Blacks--Politics and government

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fiction Writer

Poet

HistoryMakers® Category:

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, November 1, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_001, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Samuel Greenlee, author of the Spook Who Sat by the Door recounts his childhood on Chicago's South Side. His mother, a well known jazz dancer, was often on the road and young Samuel was raised in an extended family household of "race men" and radicals. He also talks about his parents family backgrounds; both of their families had come from the South to Chicago during the Great Migration. He traces his father's ancestors back to a Welsh abolitionist who married a free mulatto woman in Memphis before the U.S. Civil War.

Authors and publishers--Interviews.

African American political activists--Illinois--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Rural-urban migration--United States.

Racially mixed people--Interviews.

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs.

Hansberry, Lorraine, 1930-1965.

Discrimination in employment.

African American soldiers--Social conditions--20th century.

United States Information Service.

United States--Foreign relations--Middle East.

Motion pictures--Censorship--United States.

Hatcher, Richard G., 1933-.

Americans--Foreign countries--Interviews.

American literature--African American authors--Interviews.

Blacks--Politics and government.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_002, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Author Samuel Greenlee talks about his youth on Chicago's South Side and then at University of Wisconsin, his family and friends including Lorraine Hansberry. He discusses his choice to leave the U.S. foreign service in 1964 after eight years when he realised he could no longer work for the inherently racist State Department. Greenlee avows that black history is usually only discussed on a superficial level, leaving out the real story of regular black people and the long tradition of resistance.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_003, TRT: 0:31:08 ?

Samuel Greenlee talks about his Army service through ROTC, during which he was nearly court martialed for his refusal to wear the Confederate battle flag insignia of the Dixie Division, about his graduate study at University of Chicago and his work in the foreign service with the United States Information Service in Iraq, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Greece. Finally, he discusses his experience in Islamic countries and criticizes Americans' ignorance of other cultures.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_004, TRT: 0:31:08 ?

Sam Greenlee talks about ending his eight year career in the U.S. Foreign Service in 1965 and writing his famous novel, *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, about an armed black revolution in the United States. He places the work in the context of the events of the mid-1960s, considers the revolutionary potential of African American radical groups, and contrasts the book's immediate critical and sales success in Britain with its low-key reception in America, where he had been unable to find a publisher. Greenlee also analyzes the failure of integration and the need for African Americans to return to strengthening their own institutions.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_005, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Samuel Greenlee talks about the publication of his famous novel *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* and the making of the film version, shot in Gary, Indiana with the support of its black mayor Richard Hatcher. He relates the film's initial success and its suppression by the FBI and his subsequent persecution in the United States which caused him to move abroad from 1984 until 2000 when he returned after suffering from malaria.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_006, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Author Samuel Greenlee talks about his years abroad, his literary influences, black political thought across the spectrum, "selling out", and hip hop culture

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Greenlee, Section A2001_028_001_007, TRT: 0:26:15 ?

Author Samuel Greenlee shares his ideas about the sustaining power of black art and writing which has, he declares, "kept our people sane." He talks about the work of his peers and himself and the new generation of young black writers he has been meeting recently at poetry readings and other events, to whom he

believes he is passing along the torch as they discover his work.