

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Yvonne Seon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Seon, Yvonne, 1937-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon,
Dates:	July 14, 2003 and July 18, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:24:20).
Abstract:	Historian Yvonne Seon (1937 -) worked for the Congolese government of Patrice Lumumba and has been a board member of Africare. Seon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 14, 2003 and July 18, 2003, in Cheverly, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_154
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Born in Washington, D.C., on December 20, 1937, Yvonne Seon graduated as salutatorian of her class at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. Seon received a B.A. with honors from Allegheny College in 1959. She attended the American University as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and in 1960 earned her M.A. in political science. That same year, she met Patrice Lumumba, leader of the newly independent Congo, on his only visit to the United States. The dynamic African leader offered Seon a job in his new government. Proficient in French, and with a keen interest in Africa, Seon accepted and served as secretary of the Inga Dam project for two years. She also served in a State Department

delegation to a UNESCO conference in Paris. In 1966, Seon attended the First African Festival of the Arts held in Dakar, Senegal.

While in school at Union Graduate School, Seon became the first director of the Bolinga Black Cultural Resource Center at Wright State University. She returned to Washington, D.C., in 1972 to work for Congressman Howard Diggs. She became one of the first contributors to Africare, an American-based aid organization to Africa. By 1977, Seon was the first woman to serve on Africare's board of directors, and in 2002 she became its first vice chairwoman. When still a graduate student, Seon was drawn to the Unitarian Universalist Church, and was later ordained as a minister. Seon currently works as an associate professor of history at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland, and resides in Cheverly, Maryland.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Yvonne Seon was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 14, 2003 and July 18, 2003, in Cheverly, Maryland, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Historian Yvonne Seon (1937 -) worked for the Congolese government of Patrice Lumumba and has been a board member of Africare.

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:

Seon, Yvonne, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Seon, Yvonne, 1937---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Historian

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 Yvonne Seon, July 14, 2003 and July 18, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40 2003/07/14

Yvonne Seon was born on December 20, 1937 in

Washington, D.C. Her mother, Beatrice Reed, was born in Grenada in 1916 and can trace her family back to Scotland and West Africa. She immigrated to Washington, D.C. in the 1930s where she worked in real estate, was an active participant in pre-Civil Rights Movement organizations, worked with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and as an administrative assistant to Eugene Davidson, director of the Washington, D.C. NAACP. Seon's father, George Reed, was born in D.C. in 1911. He was born blind and orphaned shortly after birth. He grew up in the Maryland School for the Blind in Overly, Maryland, graduated from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in D.C. in 1933 and graduated summa cum laude from Howard University in 1937. Seon was raised in the Langston Terrace housing development in Northeast D.C. and attended Charles E. Young Elementary School. Seon describes her childhood personality and the sights, sounds and smells of her childhood neighborhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_001_002, TRT: 0:29:55 2003/07/14

Yvonne Seon attended Charles E. Young Elementary School, Banneker Junior High School and Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. She was admitted into Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. In college, she was not allowed to join any of the white sororities due to her race and instead joined an independent anti-sorority organization with her friends. Seon majored in political science, minored in French and graduated cum laude in 1959. She won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to the School of Government and Public Administration at American University in Washington, D.C. Seon met Patrice Lumumba in June of 1960 at a reception in D.C. He invited her to work in the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo, but had been killed by the time she arrived in the DRC in March, 1961. After his death, Lumumba was demonized by the United States press and government. Seon describes the atmosphere of uncertainty and violence during the Congo Crisis and remembers being stopped by Congolese police.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_001_003, TRT: 0:28:25 2003/07/14

Yvonne Seon talks about the death of Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, killed in a 1961 plane crash. Seon was appointed secretary of the Inga Dam Project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and met Mobutu Sese Seko, who became the dictator of Zaire in 1965, on several occasions. She traveled to Uganda's independence celebration in 1962 and attended the 1962 UNESCO general conference in Paris, France. In 1963, she returned to the United States where she joined the United States Department of State as a foreign affairs officer in the Office of International Conferences. She was introduced to the Negritude Movement and pan-Africanism at the 1966 World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal where she met Langston Hughes. On the trip, Seon visited The House of Slaves on Goree Island off the coast of Dakar and returned to Senegal again in 1972 when she saw the Door of No Return.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_001_004, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/07/14

Yvonne Seon was introduced to Negritude writers and Pan-Africanism at the 1966 World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal; one of the first Pan-African conferences held in Africa. She talks about literature that emerged from the movement, including the magazine *Presence Africaine*, and E. Franklin Frazier's article, 'What Can the American Negro Contribute to the Social Development of Africa?' which critiqued the value in African American presence in Africa. Seon was hired as the director of student life programs at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio. She remembers student civil rights demonstrations in favor of an African American studies curriculum. In 1970, she left Wilberforce for Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio where she established the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center at Wright State in 1971. During her time at Wright State, students and faculty protested the discrimination against Betty Thomas, who was denied the opportunity to apply for a promotion at the university.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_002_005, TRT: 0:30:40

Yvonne Seon joined the faculty at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and started her doctoral studies at Union Institute in 1970. When she began teaching at Wright State, the student body was overwhelmingly white. Seon helped establish the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center at Wright State in 1971. The center's original vision was to serve as a place where students and community members could expand their knowledge of African American studies. Seon talks about the development of the Center's library and that the Center not as a social space, rather one that had academic goals. Seon taught one of her courses, which was composed of a majority of white students, at the Center. The Center opened on January 15, 1961 in honor of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Seon describes the guest list on opening night, which included HistoryMaker David Driskell and 'Roots,' author Alex Haley. She talks about Alex Haley's research for his novel, 'Roots,' and briefly about budgeting for programming.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_002_006, TRT: 0:29:45

Yvonne Seon strived to make the Bolinga Black Cultural Resources Center at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio part of the campus; she brought a number visiting faculty to the center. Seon talks about Oware or Mancala, a strategy game of African origin. Seon moved to Washington, D.C. in 1973 and joined the office of Congressman Charles Diggs, then-Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. She recalls Diggs' foresight on the independence of Portugal's former African colonies and his commitment to ending South African apartheid. Seon attended the Sixth Pan-African Congress in 1974 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She earned her Ph.D. in African American Studies from Union Institute in 1974. In 1977, she joined the board of Africare as its first female member and attended FESTAC '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. While in D.C. Seon also taught a course on African American women at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section

A2003_154_002_007, TRT: 0:29:20

Yvonne Seon earned her Ph.D. degree in African American Studies from Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1974; her dissertation was on the curriculum of African American studies departments. She worked on the staff of HistoryMaker Jeff Donaldson on an organizing committee for scientific participation in FESTAC '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. At the festival, Stevie Wonder accepted the Album of the Year Grammy award for, 'Songs in the Key of Life.' Seon's maternal grandmother was a minister; Seon believes her grandmother breathed the call to ministry into her with her dying breath. She was ordained in the fall of 1981 as the first African American woman to be ordained in the Unitarian Universalist Church. She describes the focus of the Unitarian Universalist denomination as well as the role of spirituality in an Afro-centric worldview and the retention of West African culture in African American language and cuisine.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_002_008, TRT: 0:29:40

Yvonne Seon struggled to be accepted as a minister and a black woman in the Unitarian Universalist Church. Seon started her own congregation with the goal of creating a diverse and inclusive congregation. The church eventually closed due to financial difficulties small congregations face. Seon explains the role that a societal value of communalism plays in a crisis such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. Seon talks about African spirituality and spiritual communication, mega churches and the interplay between wealth and spirituality, and spiritual healing practice. Seon retired from the Unitarian Universalist denomination in 2003.

Video Oral History Interview with Yvonne Seon, Section
A2003_154_002_009, TRT: 0:27:55

Yvonne Seon explains the ritual of cannibalism as well as the significance of oral tradition to the African diaspora. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and how she would like to be

remembered. Seon reflects upon her legacy and narrates her photographs.