

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Prexy Nesbitt

Overview of the Collection

- Repository:** The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
- Creator:** Nesbitt, Prexy
- Title:** The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt,
- Dates:** August 12, 2004, December 10, 2004, January 5, 2005 and November 9, 2004
- Bulk Dates:** 2004 and 2005
- Physical Description:** 13 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:40:55).
- Abstract:** Civil rights activist and africana studies instructor Prexy Nesbitt (1944 -) worked with the Bank Withdrawal Campaign for the American Committee on Africa; the Africa Project at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.; the World Council of Churches; Chicago Mayor Harold Washington as a special assistant; the government of Mozambique; and the Program on Peace & International Cooperation with the MacArthur Foundation. In addition to his work for labor and human rights, Nesbitt also enjoyed a long career as a teacher of African and American studies at many institutions. Nesbitt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 12, 2004, December 10, 2004, January 5, 2005 and November 9, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
- Identification:** A2004_127
- Language:** The interview and records are in English.
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Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Rozell “Prexy” Nesbitt was born and raised on Chicago’s West Side. After graduating from the Francis Parker School in Chicago, Nesbitt enrolled at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. After graduating from Antioch in 1967, Nesbitt continued his education, attending the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania; Northwestern University; and Columbia University.

Even before completing his Ph.D. in 1975, Nesbitt was highly active in labor and equality movements; by 1976, he had become the national coordinator and field organizer for the Bank Withdrawal Campaign for the American Committee on Africa. Two years later Nesbitt was named the director of the Africa Project at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. In 1979, Nesbitt became the program director and secretary for research at the World Council of Churches, based in Geneva, Switzerland. Nesbitt returned to Chicago in 1984, where he continued his work as a labor organizer. In 1986, Chicago mayor Harold Washington named Nesbitt as a special assistant. The following year, the government of Mozambique appointed Nesbitt to serve as a consultant to help them represent their interests to the United States, Canada, and Europe; he remained in this post until 1992.

In 1990, Nesbitt took a post as a lecturer with the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, and in 1993, became the senior program officer with the Program on Peace & International Cooperation with the MacArthur Foundation. Nesbitt remained with the MacArthur Foundation until 1996, when he was named the dean of community engagement and diversity. In addition to his foundation work, Nesbitt worked as an African and American history teacher at his high school alma mater, Francis W. Parker School. Nesbitt also taught African History at Columbia College, and served as a consultant on diversity for the Francis W. Parker School; the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools; and the East Educational Collaborative in Washington, DC. In 2001, Nesbitt became the South African representative of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the interim director for the American Friends Service Committee Africa Program. From 2003 on, Nesbitt worked as the Senior Multiculturalism and Diversity Specialist for the Chicago Teachers Center at Northeastern Illinois University.

Nesbitt has lectured both in the United States and abroad, and has written extensively, publishing a book and articles in more than twenty international journals. Nesbitt also served as a co-writer on the BBC production of *The People’s Century* program *Skin Deep*, about racism in the United States and South Africa. Over the course of his career, Nesbitt made more than seventy trips to Africa, including trips taken in secret to apartheid torn South Africa; his work has garnered him numerous awards throughout his career.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Prexy Nesbitt was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 12, 2004, December 10, 2004, January 5, 2005 and November 9, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and africana studies instructor Prexy Nesbitt (1944 -) worked with the Bank Withdrawal Campaign for the American Committee on Africa; the Africa Project at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.; the World Council of Churches; Chicago Mayor Harold Washington as a special assistant; the government of Mozambique; and the Program on Peace & International Cooperation with the MacArthur Foundation. In addition to his work for labor and human rights, Nesbitt also enjoyed a long career as a teacher of African and American studies at many institutions.

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:

Nesbitt, Prexy

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Nesbitt, Prexy--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

African American historians--Interviews

African American labor leaders--Interviews

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

Government consultants--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

Africana Studies Instructor

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|EducationMakers

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 Prexy Nesbitt, August 12, 2004, December 10, 2004, January 5, 2005 and November 9, 2004. 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 Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_001_001, TRT: 0:31:00 2004/08/12

Prexy Nesbitt was born on February 23, 1944 in Chicago, Illinois as Rozell Williams Nesbitt. His maternal grandfather, William Crain, was a well-known C.M.E. minister. Nesbitt's mother, Sadie Crain Nesbitt, an award-winning teacher, danced with HistoryMaker Katherine Dunham and mentored Urban Gateways founder Jessie Woods and HistoryMaker Ronne Hartfield. Nesbitt's father, Rozell Nesbitt, a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, made headlines when the U.S. Army hired him as an engineer but fired him due to his race. Nesbitt's paternal uncle, George B. Nesbitt, wrote about race relations in public housing; after he criticized segregation while in the U.S. Army during World War II, he was reassigned to a post in Australia. Nesbitt's father and uncles were union organizers and adherents to Marcus Garvey's philosophy. They owned an apartment building in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood, where political activists like Studs Terkel visited. Nesbitt remembers Alderman Ben Lewis' murder in 1963.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

African American labor leaders--Interviews.

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews.

Government consultants--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_001_002, TRT: 0:30:30 2004/08/12

Prexy Nesbitt spent summers in Nashville, Tennessee and on a farm in Wisconsin while growing up. In Chicago, Nesbitt attended Pope Elementary School until fifth grade, when he transferred to Francis W. Parker School due to his family's dissatisfaction with his teacher. Nesbitt attended one of the city's first integrated churches, Warren Avenue Congregational Church, which housed Reverend Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Chicago Freedom Movement in the mid-1960s and was investigated by the FBI as a result. Through the church, Nesbitt studied abroad at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in 1965. Nesbitt remembers his sister, RoAnne Nesbitt Harris, a famous model who was murdered by her husband, Nobel Harris, in 1973. He describes his maternal uncle's Negro League baseball career alongside Roy Campanella and Jackie Robinson, and his paternal family's farm in southwestern Michigan. He recalls his mother's friendship with Gwendolyn Brooks and Mahalia Jackson, and his experience as a Red Cap.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_001_003, TRT: 0:31:15 2004/08/12

Prexy Nesbitt grew up on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. His family stayed in the neighborhood while many in the black middle class moved to the South Side. He was an avid reader of sports novels and dime westerns as a child. Nesbitt enrolled at Francis W. Parker School in 1954, and took the Clark Avenue streetcar to school every day. He endured racial prejudice when a doorman refused to let him enter a white classmate's home through the front door and when he attended the play 'A Raisin in the Sun' with a white girl. During high school, Nesbitt often played sports at Robert A. Waller High School after class, where there were more minority students. At Parker, he was named to the All Chicago Tribune football team and was mentored by Principal Jack Ellison, who gave him essays by W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. Nesbitt worked as a redcap at Chicago's Dearborn Station. He recalls curbing gang violence between African Americans and Hispanics when he worked for Mayor Harold Washington's administration.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_002_004, TRT: 0:29:59 2004/11/09

Prexy Nesbitt was introduced to African culture by his high school teacher, Jack Ellison, as well as his parents' friends, including luminaries like St. Clair Drake, Robert Hayden, and HistoryMakers Etta Moten Barnett and Katherine Dunham. He quit football after graduating from Francis W. Parker School. Nesbitt enrolled at Antioch

College in Yellow Springs, Ohio partly on the urging of his father, who had been stationed nearby in World War II. There, he volunteered in the African American community, working with the family of writer Virginia Hamilton, and protested the segregation of Gegner's barbershop. Many Antioch students participated in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, but Nesbitt's parents forbade him to join. In 1965, he studied abroad at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, where he protested against white president Ian Smith. Nesbitt recalls Julius Nyerere's speech to students arrested for demonstrating. Nesbitt supported the Antioch Program for Interracial Education in the late 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_002_005, TRT: 0:30:12 2004/11/09

Prexy Nesbitt studied at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in 1965, where he heard Che Guevara speak and met President Julius Nyerere, who popularized the Ujamaa ideology. His professors included Terence Ranger and historian Walter Rodney. Nesbitt graduated from Antioch College in 1967, and briefly studied at Columbia University before losing his fellowship after being involved in the 1968 protests. He was drafted into the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, but instead traveled to Africa, where he was able to join the Mozambique Liberation Front due to his parents' friendship with Eduardo Mondlane. When he returned to the U.S., Nesbitt was hired at the American Committee on Africa, where he helped to produce Robert Van Lierop's film 'A Luta Continua' and also supported the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement in Massachusetts, which resulted in him being thrown out of the 1971 Black Expo by HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. Nesbitt reflects on Malcolm X's travels to Africa in the 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_002_006, TRT: 0:30:59 2004/11/09

Prexy Nesbitt attended Ph.D. programs at both the University of Chicago and Northwestern University during the mid-1970s, but ended his studies upon realizing he preferred activism to academics. In 1977, he joined the American Committee on Africa, for which he launched

The Committee to Oppose Bank Loans to South Africa. On the urging of scholar Eqbal Ahmad, Nesbitt worked for the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., and then became program secretary for the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism in Geneva, Switzerland in 1979. Nesbitt considers the Central Intelligence Agency's role in backing the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) during the Angolan Civil War, and their efforts to win endorsements for Unita from HistoryMaker Leon DeCosta Dash, Richard Gibson, and Florence Tate. He reflects on the African American community's view of authoritarian leaders like Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and the American people's ignorance about the African continent.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_002_007, TRT: 0:21:10 2004/11/09

Prexy Nesbitt suffered the murder of his sister, RoAnne Nesbitt Harris, in 1973, shortly after the assassination of Amilcar Cabral. His father, Rozell Nesbitt, visited Africa with him in the early 1980s. The World Council of Churches, which had supported HistoryMaker Angela Davis during her arrest and trial in the early 1970s, divested its holdings from South Africa and hosted activists like Dulcie September during Nesbitt's tenure there from 1979 to 1983. After leaving the World Council, Nesbitt was smuggled into South Africa, traveling through Lesotho and Transkei, to teach social organizing at a church in rural South Africa. When the police were tipped off to his presence, he fled the country disguised as a nun. Nesbitt cites the unions, outside sanctions, and armed rebellion, especially the Cuban-supported victory at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, as key factors to ending the apartheid regime in the early 1990s. Nesbitt named his sons, Samora Nesbitt and Jele Magdalena, after African leaders.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_003_008, TRT: 0:29:20 2004/12/10

Prexy Nesbitt recalls how the FBI interrogated parishioners at Warren Avenue Congregational Church to uncover links to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was not invited to the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar

es Salaam, Tanzania in 1974, which he believes was due to his Marxism. During that event, Agostinho Neto gave the speech “Who is the Enemy?” In the 1970s, Nesbitt worked with Robert Van Lierop to advocate for the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola over the National Liberation Front of Angola and Unita, which was supported by President Gerald Ford, at the start of the Angolan Civil War. During the 1980s, Nesbitt uncovered Counterintelligence Program files on himself and his uncle, George Nesbitt. Starting in 1977, he organized for the American Committee on Africa to oppose apartheid in South Africa, which was being supported by Lyndon Larouche’s U.S. Labor Party. Nesbitt reflects on the deaths of African liberation leaders like Stephen Biko and Walter Rodney.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_003_009, TRT: 0:28:50 2004/12/10

Prexy Nesbitt supported the Mozambique Liberation Front during the early 1970s guerilla war chronicled in the film ‘A Luta Continua.’ He and Robert Van Lierop edited ‘Return to the Source,’ a 1973 collection of Amilcar Cabral’s speeches. From 1977 to 1979, Nesbitt worked at the Institute for Policy Studies, through which he supported South Africa’s liberation, worked with Elizabeth Schmidt and Kevin Danaher, and helped publish Schmidt’s book, ‘Decoding Corporate Camouflage,’ which critiqued Leon Sullivan’s approach to divestment from South Africa. In 1979, Nesbitt joined the World Council of Churches, where he worked to combat racism internationally despite media and religious opposition to the World Council’s left-wing politics. He was an assistant to Chicago Mayor Harold Washington; and, in 1987, became a special representative for President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique. He reflects on the African liberation struggle, including the support of Pope Paul VI and South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_003_010, TRT: 0:29:30 2004/12/10

Prexy Nesbitt worked for the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, which was run by HistoryMaker Lucius Walker, during the 1970s. He was

part of the World Council of Churches' delegation to the newly formed Zimbabwean government in the early 1980s, and recalls being mistaken for an anti-communist mercenary by a white woman. In 1983, Nesbitt was smuggled into apartheid South Africa to teach social change and organizing for a week. He then had to flee the country into Lesotho disguised as a nun. From 1987 to 1991, he worked as a representative for the government of Mozambique, and interviewed child soldiers between ten and thirteen years old during the civil war against the Mozambique National Resistance. In the early 1990s, Nesbitt was offered a role with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Dullah Omar, but had to decline due to his job with the MacArthur Foundation. He recalls learning about the courtship of Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel from Machel, a personal friend.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_003_011, TRT: 0:29:50 2004/12/10

Prexy Nesbitt attended the first meeting of the African National Congress (ANC) after the ANC returned to South Africa in 1991. At that conference in Durban, he heard speeches from Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela and saw the warm reception given to Albie Sachs. After Mandela became president of South Africa in 1994, the government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which focused on restorative justice and dismantling corporate structures that enabled apartheid. Nesbitt reflects on the unequal distribution of land and the scarcity of capital for landowners in Africa, and how those issues are compounded by the corruption of leaders like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. He admires Winnie Mandela as a hero of the movement, but notes with regret her adultery and criminal activity. Nesbitt became an adjunct professor of African history at Columbia College Chicago. He critiques the ignorance and apathy towards Africa in parts of the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_003_012, TRT: 0:13:30 2004/12/10

Prexy Nesbitt describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He considers his role models within his own family as well as the Civil Rights

Movement figures like Mahalia Jackson and Robert Hayden that influenced him. He reflects upon his life and legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Section
A2004_127_004_013, TRT: 0:04:50 2005/01/05

Prexy Nesbitt narrates his photographs.