

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Khephra Burns

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Burns, Khephra
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns,
Dates:	September 13, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:44).
Abstract:	Author Khephra Burns (1950 -) has written books, plays, and works for television; his work can also be seen in monthly publications including, Essence magazine, Art & Auction and the Boulé Journal. Burns was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 13, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_215
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author, fiction writer, and scriptwriter Khephra Burns was born October 2, 1950 in Los Angeles, California, to Isham and Treneta Cecelia Burns. In 1972, Burns received his bachelor's degree in English literature and drama from the University of California at Santa Barbara, after which he moved to New York to launch his writing career.

In 1978, Burns joined the staff of PBS television affiliate WNET-Thirteen as a writer and associate producer. Burns remained associated with PBS and

educational programming, producing documentaries about different aspects of the African American experience. Burns's body of work includes several acclaimed books, including *Black Stars in Orbit*, *Mansa Musa*, and *Confirmation: The Spiritual Wisdom that has Shaped Our Lives*, which he wrote with his wife, writer and editor Susan Taylor. Burns also contributed to several monthly publications including *Essence*, *Art & Auction* and the *Boulé Journal*.

In addition to television and print media, Burns is also active in the theater arts; in 1981, he was commissioned by Harry Belafonte to write *Stackalee*, a full length stage drama. As a playwright, Burns also wrote *African Odyssey*, which premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in 1997, and *Tall Horse*, which played both in South Africa and in New York City at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in 2005. Burns has served as the Grand Graptor for Sigma Pi Psi and as a member of the Guardsmen.

Khephra Burns was interviewed by the *The HistoryMakers* on September 13, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Khephra Burns was conducted by Shawn Wilson on September 13, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Author Khephra Burns (1950 -) has written books, plays, and works for television; his work can also be seen in monthly publications including, *Essence* magazine, *Art & Auction* and the *Boulé Journal*.

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:

Burns, Khephra

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burns, Khephra--Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

African American television producers and directors--New York (State)--
New York--Interviews

African American dramatists--Interviews

Organizations:

Occupations:

Author

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Khephra Burns, September 13, 2005. 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 Khephra Burns, Section
A2005_215_001_001, TRT: 0:29:49 2005/09/13

Khephra Burns was born on October 2, 1950 in Los Angeles, California to Treneta Davis Burns and HistoryMaker Rusty Burns. Both sets of his grandparents moved from New Orleans, Louisiana to Los Angeles to live in a city with less discrimination. Burns' maternal grandfather, Sylvester Davis, served in the segregated U.S. Navy during World War I and then became a sanitation worker. Burns' maternal grandmother, Treneta Davis, worked for Pacific Gas and Electric Company. His mother, the youngest of five children, was intermittently raised by her grandmother and a family friend nicknamed Aunt Cora when the family lacked money to care for her. Burns' parents both attended David Starr Jordan High School, but did not meet until they were students together at George Pepperdine College. They frequented nightclubs on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, and saw Nat King Cole perform. His father had a passion for flying, and in the early 1940s, passed the test to enter training with the Tuskegee Airmen in Alabama.

African American families--California--Los Angeles.
United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.
World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.
African American soldiers--Social conditions--Alabama.
Migration, Internal--California--Los Angeles.
Pepperdine University--Students.

Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns, Section
A2005_215_001_002, TRT: 0:29:44 2005/09/13

Khephra Burns' paternal grandparents, Nona Bertrand

Burns and Isham Burns, Sr., were born in New Orleans, Louisiana. After Burns' grandfather suffered a nervous breakdown and stopped working, Burns' grandmother moved with her five children to Los Angeles, California. Burns retells his father, HistoryMaker Rusty Burns', experience growing up in the Great Depression. Burns' father joined the Tuskegee Airmen, but did not see combat action. Rusty Burns started a pilot training school in Compton, California with fellow airman Paul Anderson, then later ran his own business, Rusty's Flying Service. In the 1950s, Burns' parents bought a home in Compton through loans from their parents and help from the G.I. Bill. Burns entered McKinley Elementary School in 1955, and transferred to St. Albert the Great Elementary School in fifth grade. He recalls how many in his community were originally from the South, including his neighbor Dr. James Whitmore, and the upswing of drugs and violence in Compton during the early 1960s.

African American families--California--Compton.

African American air pilots--California--Compton.

Migration, Internal--California.

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

Watts (Los Angeles, Calif.)--Social conditions.

Drug abuse--California--Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns, Section
A2005_215_001_003, TRT: 0:29:39 2005/09/13

Khephra Burns entered St. Albert the Great Elementary School in Compton, California in the fifth grade. He recalls the armed National Guard troops and the looting and fires of the Watts riots in 1965. While attending Verbum Dei High School in Los Angeles, Burns and his friends were attacked by a gang of students from an all-white school at a sports game. During his senior year, Burns' father, HistoryMaker Rusty Burns, began working on a project for North American Rockwell Corporation and moved the family to Simi Valley, California. At Simi Valley High School, Burns was sent to remedial English before being correctly placed in the Advanced Placement class, and practiced the saxophone daily. After his application to become a commercial pilot was denied due

to an eye issue, he attended Moorpark College and then the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he was threatened by police while living in student housing. Burns moved to the Bay Area after college, to become involved with the Black Panther Party.

African American families--California.

Riots--California--Los Angeles.

African American students--Education (Higher)--California.

University of California, Santa Barbara--Students.

Moorpark College--Students.

African Americans--California--Oakland.

Black Panther Party--California.

United States National Guard.

Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns, Section
A2005_215_001_004, TRT: 0:30:25 2005/09/13

Khephra Burns joined the Black Panther Party as he was inspired by their stance against police brutality. He reflects on the perceived inadequacy of nonviolent civil rights marches in the late 1960s and how Elaine Brown reorganized the Panthers when she assumed leadership of the Party in 1974. Burns graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1972. He planned to be a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, but was not drafted. He taught high school and college English, and then was hired at Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Burns befriended his co-worker Michael Butler and the TV writer Ilunga Adell, who lived in the apartment below him. Adell introduced him to Ellis Haizlip, the producer of 'Soul!' at WNET-TV. Haizlip admired Burns' writing and brought him to New York City to pitch his script about Marie Laveau. After HistoryMaker Harry Belafonte picked up the option on Burns' script, Burns joined WNET, where he worked on 'Skyline' and produced material for Black History Month.

African Americans--California--Oakland.

Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Co.--Employees.

African American musicians--California--Oakland.

African American authors--California--Oakland.

African Americans--New York (State)--New York.

African American television producers and directors--New York (State)--New York.

Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.)--Employees.

Haizlip, Ellis B., 1932-.

Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns, Section
A2005_215_001_005, TRT: 0:29:44 2005/09/13

Khephra Burns worked at WNET-TV in New York City as a producer under Ellis Haizlip. He also worked as a freelance writer and for the Recruiting and Training Program, where he wrote speeches for Bayard Rustin. Submitting drawings and writings to Essence magazine led him to meet his future wife, HistoryMaker Susan Taylor, whom Burns took on a first date to a Wynton Marsalis concert. Through Taylor, Burns became a writer for 'Essence: The Television Program.' He continued working in television as a producer for 'Black Men In Dance' and the 'Images and Realities' series with Gene Davis. Burns moved to documentary film, producing with William Miles 'Black Champions' and 'Black Stars in Orbit,' which he adapted into a children's book. His work as an author also includes writing 'Mansa Musa: The Lion of Mali' and co-editing 'Confirmation: The Spiritual Wisdom That Has Shaped Our Lives' with his wife. Burns developed his play 'Tall Horse' with Handspring Puppet Company from South Africa, and it premiered in 2004.

African American authors--New York (State)--New York.

Essence Communications, Inc.

African American television producers and directors.

Taylor, Susan L.

Belafonte, Harry, 1927-.

African American couples--New York (State)--New York.

Puppet theater.

Cape Town (South Africa).

African Americans--Marriage--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Khephra Burns, Section

Khephra Burns describes the relationship between Europe and Africa in the 19th century as it is dramatized in his play 'Tall Horse,' and how the gift of a giraffe from Egypt to France was a pivotal moment in that relationship. Burns began working as the editor and publisher of the Boule Journal in 1992. He formally joined Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity and became its grand graptor later in the 1990s. He reflects on recent political controversies, such as the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court and the 2000 election, and how the Boule responded to them. Burns describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered, and reflects upon his legacy. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs. Sigma Pi Phi.

African American editors--New York (State)--New York.
African American authors--New York (State)--New York.
African Americans--Conduct of life.