

Sam Greenlee and the Revolutionary Tradition in African American Literature in the 19th-21st Centuries

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“Matter Prefatory”: Quiet as it’s kept; there is an extensive tradition that spans several genres and three centuries in African American Literature of hard core revolutionary writing of which Sam Greenlee’s fine novel, *THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR*, 1969 is a part. Thus far, it is the only one of these works to be made into a motion picture (1973). Film, as an artistic genre, is far less open to freedom of expression than the world of books. Historically, the film industry is also far more racist. Practically all the African Americans associated with the film version of *THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR* had their careers “white-balled,” especially Ivan Dixon, an actor of great promise, who directed it. Practically every note that Herbie Hancock has ever recorded is available on the open market, but not the fine soundtrack (which blends pre-Miles Davis acoustic lush-life piano with post-Miles percussive electric keyboards) to Greenlee’s film. In most eras, books advancing ideas about a Black revolution in America are subjected to stern scrutiny and eye-rolling skepticism. Greenlee completed his controversial book in 1966, but had to wait three years before Allison & Busby, Margaret Busby’s “the Black and brave” company in London finally published it. The central understanding about Black revolutionary writing is this: these books are not protest works shouting or whining to the racist white man about anything. Black revolutionary art writing is extra dangerous in the realm of racists, because such writing

is directed exclusively to the victims of white racism, directed to the would-be revolutionaries themselves!

Sam Greenlee's other books include: *BAGHDAD BLUES*, 1976 (novel); *BLUES FOR AN AFRICAN PRINCESS*, 1971, *AMMUNITION: POETRY & OTHER RAPS*, 1975; and *BE-BOP MAN / BE-BOP WOMAN & OTHER RAPS IN TWO ACTS*, 1992. *THE SPOOK* film is largely treated like taboo contraband material in most studies of Black films. It is critiqued briefly in Ed Guerrero's *FRAMING BLACKNESS: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGE IN FILM*, 1993 as an excellent film, perhaps the best of those of the genuine articles that slipped through in the 1970's Blaxploitation era. Greenlee's masterpiece of the genre is more extensively analyzed in Stephanie Dunn's "*BAAD BITCHES*" & *SUPERMAMAS: BLACK POWER ACTION FILMS*, 2008. Her treatment is slack because the book is almost exclusively dogged under the aegis of a white feminist-type critique that mostly avoids the social-political urgencies of white racist's intention of keeping Black people (woman, man, and child) in the cage and on constant lockdown, without the slightest concern about gender issues. Her analysis suffers from offering up Sam under the prototypical "all men are sexist dogs" approach.

In the wake of the pervasive Black Arts Movement which, at that time, was totally persuasive in African American communities in the USA and internationally many other Black writers broke wide and began to imagine the prospect of being warriors who had to battle for freedom. Black art began to reflect those long repressed desires of successfully struggling to actually be free, and in the USA. This was the era when Amiri Baraka starting chanting his poem "It's Nation Time":

Time to get

together
time to be one strong fast black energy space
 one pulsating magnetism, rising
time to get up and
be
come
(Baraka, 21)

We were so fierce and fearsome then! In Black Panther stalwart George L. Jackson's 1972 book *BLOOD IN MY EYE*, he boldly discusses means of conducting guerilla warfare in urban America. In a very similar vein, no one should forget or leave unread the autobiography of the head of the Black Liberation Army, Sister Assata Shakur. The eponymously titled *ASSATA* (1987) is one of the great books of the African American experience, so revolutionary that it too, like Greenlee's *THE SPOOK*, had to be first published in London, England. The later 1960s, a decade in which there was some 300 fiery pissed-off Ferguson, MOs in the USA, and the early 1970s is when the feel, the smell, and the threat of revolution were in the air.

This was the era when one Last Poet chanted, "When The Revolution Comes," and another Last Poet challenged all of us with the taunt only "Niggers Are Scared of Revolution." It was also the era in which Gil Scott-Heron avowed that "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." As catchy/grabby as that poem was: nevertheless when ex-US Navy man, ex-Black Panther Mark Essex attempted to provoke a revolution in New Orleans, LA., in 1972, those events were actually on television. Gil immortalized Essex's actions twice. First in the middle of his remix of Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues":

Did you ever hear about Mark Essex
And the things that made him choose

To fight the “Inner City Blues?”
Yeah! Essex took to the rooftops guerilla-style
And watched as all the crackers went wild.
Brought in 600 troops, I hear
Brand new to see them crushed by fear
Essex fought back with a hundred rounds
And New Orleans was a changing town
And rat-a-tat, tat-tat-tat, was the only sound.
(Scott-Heron, 2000, 53)

Gil came back to the revolutionary example of Mark Essex in his extended nine minute and seventeen second song that features the Pharaoh Sanders-inspired incendiary saxophone of Bilal Sunni Ali. On the recording, Gil duets with the golden voiced Victor Brown who enthrallingly leads with the mighty mighty words of the poem “Essex”:

Let me see what life will bring
Let me a further thing
Let me see the kings of old re-crown themselves
Let me see the lost regained
Who found themselves
Let me make a new sunrise
Catch them sleeping by surprise
Wake the giant up and see
Them cast off fear
We gonna make the wall of ignorance disappear.
(Scott-Heron, 1976, 6)

Mark Essex’s total story is more expansively told in documentary-prose in Peter Heron’s *A TERRIBLE THUNDER: THE STORY OF THE NEW ORLEANS SNIPER*, 1978. Wonderfully influenced by all of this, Stevie Wonder sang (while NYC DJ Gary Byrd chanted) in “The Crown” (1982) we need to hear “the story never told” about the kingdoms “of our people and then [of] how we fought for freedom” (Wonder, 1982).

The first novel focusing on Black-on-white retaliatory violence was Martin Robison Delany’s *BLAKE OR THE HUTS OF AMERICAN (1859-1862)*, which depicted

concurrent slave rebellions in the Southern United States and in Cuba. In his novel *Delany*, one of the true fathers of Black Nationalist thought creates fictional representations of real life revolutionary figures of the 19th century such as Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and the Cuban revolutionary enslaved poet Juan Placido. Delany even indulges in futuristic Black rhetorical flourishes, with characters going about referring to white slave masters as “alabasters” (Delany 259). The last line of dialog in *BLAKE* is “Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say” (Delany 313). Controversial, for real, the book was buried and hidden for over one hundred and ten years.

One slave narrative that depicted an organized group of revolutionaries striking back against would be slave catchers is the virtually hidden narrative of William Parker, who led a group of Black Panther Party for Self Defense resembling runaway slaves in Christiana, Pa. Parker, his equally fiery wife Eliza, and their people repeatedly repelled would-be slave catchers’ attempts to drag people back down South. Parker’s story *FUGITIVES RESIST KIDNAPPING*, which was published in 1866, depicts an incident from 1851 when they killed a slave master and successfully escaped into Canada, never to return. Vividly and dramatically written, it will make a wonderful film, someday! It is published in Charles H. Nichols (ed.) *BLACK MEN IN CHAINS: NARRATIVES BY ESCAPED SLAVES*, 1972. This event was major news in the era since it cost the federal government over \$50,000. The Parkers’ actions are spoken of in glowing scholarly terms in Mumia Abu-Jamal’s autobiography, *WE WANT FREEDOM: A LIFE IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY*, 2004. Parker’s narrative was turned into a minor realistic historical novel by Harry W. Kendall, *TRUTH CRUSHED TO THE EARTH: THE LEGACY OF WILL PARKER, A BLACK REVOLUTIONARY*, 1999.

Other multi-genre works on the revolutionary themes include: W.E.B. Du Bois' novel, *DARK PRINCESS*, 1928, which is concerned with a Third World revolution; the politically contradictory George S. Schuyler's two Black Nationalist revolutionary science fiction fantasy novels, both serialized in the *PITTSBURGH COURIER*, a Black newspaper, under the pseudonym Samuel I. Brooks: *BLACK INTERNATIONALE*, 1936 and *BLACK EMPIRE*, 1938.

Nearly three decades later as Black activism and social movements pressed toward freedom alternatives, we got the dramatic work of the heroic Father of the Black Arts Literary Movement, Amiri Baraka's two act play *THE SLAVE*, 1964 which depicted, very much in the manner that Sam Greenlee would employ two years later, an ambivalent ending that stopped short of a successful overthrow of white racist America. On the other side of the revolutionary dramatic spectrum was Baraka's 1965 one act drama, "Experimental Death Unit 1," which ends with dead devilish white heads paraded on poles and the revolution in apparently successful progress in his collection, *FOUR BLACK REVOLUTIONARY PLAYS*, 1969.

In 1967, the masterful Chester Himes (author of 22 fearless books) started his own novel of Black revolution in America, *PLAN B*. This book is so bloody scary that it wasn't published until 1993, after Chester was safely dead for nine years.

But In 1969, the same year Sam Greenlee's *THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR* was published, the great John A. Williams released his first novel about a Black revolutionary strike force in the *USA SONS OF DARKNESS, SONS OF LIGHT*. **In this book, the incident that sparks the revolution is - as in real life - is a police brutality murder on an unarmed Black person. Hard core Black writers don't**

write purely fictional yarns, what they write is better called “faction”. John A. Williams doubled down on this fighting back theme in his 1987 revolutionary novel, *JACOB’S LADDER*.

Two more novels from the tradition of “fed-up with suffering peacefully” school of Black writing: a great book waiting to be filmed is John Edgar Wideman’s *THE LYNCHERS*, 1973. Wideman (the not well enough known author of eighteen books) begins *THE LYNCHERS* with a section called “Matter Prefatory,” which includes a one hundred and sixteen point listing of Black-hating lynching incidents from the 19th century and a ten page section of 20th century incidents and accounts called “On Lynching,” before starting his story of a group Black radicals who hatch a plan to lynch a murderous white policeman in hopes of jump-starting the fabled revolution.

I conclude this brief discussion of *THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR* related literature by mentioning Jeff Stetson’s cold chills novel of African American retribution *BLOOD ON THE LEAVES*, 2004. Stetson is mostly known for his imaginative 1984 play “THE MEETING,” which depicts Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. debating one another about the best path toward liberation for African Americans in white racist captivity. Enslaved rebel Nat Turner reported that he saw “blood on the leaves” before he did his revolutionary thing. Stetson’s 21st century book depicts Black avengers tracking down and eliminating cold-case racist murderers from the Civil Rights era in and around Jackson, Mississippi. The movie industry will make a thieving dirt-bag movie off of the lame wrong-headed and deceitful novel, *THE HELP*,

but not off a book that projects its themes from what Nat Turner saw, like *BLOOD ON THE LEAVES!*

As Sam Greenlee's *THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR* demonstrates and illuminates, it takes an activist Black writer with a real Black story to make a genuine Black movie.

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