



PROJECT MUSE®

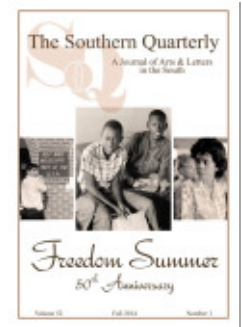
We Were All Pioneers: A Discussion with Simeon Booker

E. James West

The Southern Quarterly, Volume 52, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 215-223
(Article)

Published by College of Arts and Letters, University of Southern
Mississippi

DOI: 10.1353/soq.2014.0013



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/soq/summary/v052/52.1.west.html>

We Were All Pioneers: A Discussion with Simeon Booker

E. JAMES WEST

Esteemed African American journalist, writer and activist Simeon Booker was born in Baltimore in 1918 and spent his formative years in Youngstown, Ohio. His professional journalism career is indelibly linked with *Jet* magazine and Johnson Publishing Company, where he served as the company's Washington, DC, Bureau Chief for over half a century. Following his retirement in 2007, Simeon and his wife Carol collaborated to write his widely praised retrospective *Shocking the Conscience*, which was published in 2013.¹

Booker began his career in journalism by writing stories for the *Youngstown Vindicator* while still in high school. He went on to contribute to members of the *Afro-American Newspapers* chain as an English major at Virginia Union University. In 1950 he was awarded a prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University before becoming the first black staff reporter at the *Washington Post*. Booker left the *Post* in 1953 to join Johnson Publishing Company, publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. His coverage of Emmett Till's murder in 1955 and the subsequent trial of the men accused of his killing received national acclaim. Booker was one of a handful of journalists who accompanied activists from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) on the Freedom Rides of 1961. When the first bus was bombed outside of Anniston, AL, and riders on the second bus were beaten unconscious, Booker called Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to warn that without federal intervention the riders would never make it out of the South alive. He would go on to become one of the most influential black journalists of the twentieth century, covering every presidential election since the Eisenhower administration until his retirement in 2007.

Described in *Jet* magazine as the “Jackie Robinson of Journalism,” Booker’s contributions to American newspaper and magazine reporting throughout his long career have been recognized through multiple prizes and accolades.² In 1982, he became the first African American recipient of the National Press Club’s Fourth Estate Award for lifetime contributions to the field of journalism, and in 1999 he was honored with the Washington Association of Black Journalists Lifetime Achievement Award and the Master Communicators Award from the National Black Media Coalition. Following his retirement, Booker was inducted into the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame. In addition to his output as a journalist, Booker has written a number

of books, including a treatise on the significance of the ongoing civil rights struggle titled *Black Man’s America* published in 1964,³ and more recently, an eyewitness account as a reporter who covered every major battle of the civil rights movement titled *Shocking the Conscience*.

In this interview, Booker reflects on his experiences as a black journalist in the 1950s and 1960s, the role of the black press, and magazines such as *Jet* in giving form and focus to civil rights activism. He illustrates how broader divisions in literary and media representations of civil rights activism and protest played out on a local level and how black journalists and newspapermen balanced tensions between black literary production and activist sentiment. The interview also explores Booker’s relationship with other major black journalists and writers of the time, how he conceptualizes his own contributions to black literary production, and the role the memory and legacy of the movement years continues to play in the black literary tradition. We also touch on the recent significance of *Jet* ending its print run and moving to an all-digital format, and how this can be linked to broader implications for the future of the black press in a post-Obama world.



Simeon Booker, 2007. Photo by Fred Watkins. Used with permission.

University of Manchester, England

JW: Thank you for taking the time to share your personal recollections with the readers of *The Southern Quarterly*, Simeon. I want to begin by asking you broadly about the role of the black press in the civil rights struggle. How central was the black press to the movement as a whole?

SB: The black press was even more important to the civil rights movement than social media have proven to be to recent revolutionary movements around the world. When atrocities are committed with no one to report them and no photographs of what's happening, evil has a field day. For decades, the white press ignored blacks except in sensational crime coverage (not civil rights crimes), entertainment, and sports. While black newspapers gave front-page space to stories like the civil rights-related murders of Reverend George W. Lee and other activists in Mississippi in 1955, not a single white paper carried these stories. A few months later, the black press generated such an outpouring of grief and anger over the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till that the mainstream press could not ignore it. Television coverage then followed with vivid footage of such shocking events (for an American television audience) as a screaming white mob pursuing a black schoolgirl in Little Rock, a posse trampling men, women and children marching peacefully across a bridge in Selma, and fire hoses pummeling children in Birmingham. It was no longer possible for white Americans to say "I didn't know."

JW: How did this broader engagement within the press over civil rights issues play out on the ground?

SB: It's been suggested that when the white press finally arrived on the civil rights scene, the black press was edged out of the picture. Nothing could be further from reality. There were many stories the white press still did not cover, or if they did, didn't cover as thoroughly as the black press. White reporters arriving from out-of-town to cover a story would make their first stop the local daily [newspaper], which often extended the courtesy of desk space and a telephone, while black reporters had no such luxury. But the local dailies were often in lockstep with the white power structure, including the sheriff, often one of the worst racists in town. Furthermore, simply by being both black and a reporter, your race and occupation made you more than a mere observer as far as any mob was concerned and anything that happened to the principal players could also happen to you. We saw this in Little Rock in 1957 when Jimmy Hicks of the *New York Amsterdam News* and Moses Newson, *Baltimore Afro-American*, had to run for their lives from a crazed, racist mob outside Central High School. *Jet* photographer Earl Davy was beaten, as was *Memphis Tri-State Defender* editor L. Alex Wilson, who refused to run, and never recovered from the blows. The *New York Times* was

caught unaware (their southern correspondent was covering a school opening in Chattanooga) when Little Rock erupted. I was in the Arkansas capital for at least a week before the violence broke out, having been alerted by local black leaders that whatever happened this would be a big story.

Another example was the Freedom Rides that departed Washington, DC, on May 4, 1961, led by CORE's James Farmer. No white newspaper considered the nearly two-week trip worth a reporter's time, but *Jet* sent me and freelance photographer Theodore Gaffney, while Moses Newson, writing for the *Afro-American* chain, joined the ride in North Carolina. Newson's Greyhound bus was an hour ahead of us outside Anniston, Alabama, when the Klan flattened the tires and tossed a firebomb through a window, trying to trap the riders inside. Gaffney and I were in the back (the black section) of the Trailways bus when young white toughs boarded in Anniston, beat up the black and white Freedom Riders, and tossed them in the aisle, cursing and threatening the rest of us with the same treatment if we moved. As Washington bureau chief, I had recently interviewed the Attorney General about the Kennedy administration's plans for enforcing civil rights in the South. When I mentioned that I would be accompanying the Freedom Riders and that they expected trouble in the South, he had casually invited me to call him if any problems arose. When we finally reached Birmingham, I didn't hesitate to make that call. Within hours it became very clear the only way we would make it out was with federal help, which Robert Kennedy provided.

JW: What about in relation to the Emmett Till trial specifically?

SB: The presence of so many reporters for the white press, and even several from overseas, gave us a sense that times were finally changing in terms of white awareness. But we weren't sure to what extent the white press, particularly the TV reporters, would cover the full story.

JW: Were you disappointed by the verdict?

SB: I think that while we were all disappointed, we were not surprised by the verdict. We hoped that the outrageousness of the whole trial, including the verdict, might lead to a better outcome in the next case. We knew there would be many more. We never lost an abiding faith that things would get better, but we had no idea how much this tragic case would contribute to that.

JW: What about *Jet's* role in the Till case?

SB: Just before her death in 2003, Mamie Till Bradley wrote a memoir about her son's brutal murder, which she titled *Death of Innocence*. I think it was

the horrible specter of two grown men torturing and murdering a bright-eyed, handsome young boy for no reason other than racial hatred that made many people wonder, “What have we come to?” When *Jet* ran the photograph of young Emmett’s mutilated body, it was barely recognizable as human. Some readers thought it a photo of an alien. Beside it was a portrait taken just months before of a beautiful child. If two white men could do that to an innocent child and be acquitted after perhaps the most bizarre trial, then what hope had any other black man or woman? It was a galvanizing moment and much more. I know of no one who after seeing that photograph in *Jet*, ever forgot it—from Rosa Parks who said she thought of Emmett Till when she refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery a few months later to the young activists who descended on Mississippi for Freedom Summer in 1964.

JW: The images you talk about are still so resonant today, as the movement years continue to cast a long shadow over black literary and cultural production.

SB: Undoubtedly. The civil rights era was a time of such hope and courage, such unimaginable determination in the face of ignorance, hatred and violence. I don’t think our literature has yet captured even a tenth of the texture of that period. The generation that formed the core of Freedom Summer fused youthful impatience with a level and breadth of education blacks never enjoyed before. Veterans of the movement are still sharing their experiences with other generations that can’t begin to imagine what it was like. New books such as SNCC activist Charlie Cobb’s *This Nonviolence Stuff’ll Get You Killed* published in 2014,⁴ for example, explore a poignant aspect of Freedom Summer: the reconciliation of a nonviolent ideology with a tradition of self-defense. I’m sure there’ll be much more in the future.

JW: How did you reconcile your feelings as a black man with the need for so-called journalistic objectivity when covering such horrific stories?

SB: You’ll often read where a black reporter says he or she was not impartial but an activist. That doesn’t mean we didn’t report the facts. We certainly did. But it was not our job to give credence to the incredible—for example, where the *New York Times* gave credence to Sheriff Strider’s claim that it couldn’t be determined if the body retrieved from the Tallahatchie River was even that of a black person, much less Emmett Till’s, we didn’t pretend that this was credible testimony, since he’d sent the body (which still bore Emmett’s father’s ring on one finger) to a black mortuary.

JW: Where would you place *Jet* within this narrative?

SB: *Jet* was not only the single black national news magazine, it was also well-funded by a publisher whose pledge was to provide black readers with all the news—good and bad—on the road to freedom. I think civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton put it very well on the magazine’s anniversary in 2006 when he said that *Jet* had lasted fifty-five years because it had become “the single most important barometer of where Blacks were at any given time... *Jet* literally took us from the back of the bus to the front of Capitol Hill.”

JW: Do you see *Jet* as a radical publication and, if so, how did that influence political engagement with the magazine?

SB: I don’t think either *Jet* or the black press in general could be considered “radical.” The black newspapers with a national circulation and the handful of dailies (the *Chicago Daily Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Atlanta Daily World*) certainly were not. And I’m sure that other black reporters and their newspapers were able to cultivate relationships with top officials in every administration at least since Truman’s. Alice Dunnigan, for example, Washington correspondent for the Associated Negro Press news service during the Truman and Eisenhower years, wrote about the contacts she established at high levels throughout the executive branch in her autobiography, which has been updated for publication by the University of Georgia Press next year⁵. The Kennedy Administration probably provided better access to the black press than any of its predecessors, beginning with the Kennedy campaign when the candidate brought an entourage of press planes back to Washington, DC because a hotel in Paducah, Kentucky, refused me a room. Deputy Press Secretary Andrew Hatcher, who stayed on into the Johnson Administration, was a veteran black newsman with many solid contacts in the black press.

What Robert Kennedy, J. Edgar Hoover and perhaps others might have appreciated about *Jet* was that it gave them the opportunity to answer criticism—which we scrupulously reported. One often repeated criticism of the FBI, for example, even in the 1950s, was summed up by the question: Why can’t these federal agents who are famous for taking down major crime figures solve even one civil rights crime in the South? We put the question to Hoover and ran the FBI’s answer. Another example was the criticism of Robert Kennedy in 1963, reported under my *Jet* headline, “RFK RETREATS ON CIVIL RIGHTS BILL AS NEGROES SCREAM; ‘SELLOUT!’” The following week, *Jet* ran Kennedy’s side of the story; and in the next issue, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins responded to the Attorney General’s arguments. Neither side could say the magazine wasn’t fair.

I think administration officials, beginning with the Kennedy White House, recognized *Jet*'s impressive national circulation, as well as the fairness of its publisher. (John H. Johnson was never a political partisan.) *Jet*'s Christmas and Inauguration parties welcomed administration officials of whichever party was in office as well as members of Congress from both parties, because blacks could not afford to be left "outside, looking in" when either political party held sway. These officials never received (and as far as I recall, never requested) any favors from our publications. That includes Deke DeLoach of the FBI, who represented Hoover at our Christmas and Inaugural parties and always respected our journalistic integrity.

JW: Would you say the magazine's role within the movement overall is undervalued?

SB: I think it's recognized that *Jet* focused on *all* the news of interest to the black freedom movement that could be gathered by staff reporters as well as the use of wire services and any other means. Because it was also conveniently pocket-sized, attractive (there was usually a beautiful black woman or entertainer on the cover, and a "beauty of the week" in the centerfold), and included entertainment, sports, and black society news as well as humor, history, and talented photography in addition to hard news, *Jet* succeeded in appealing to the broadest audience, achieving unmatched circulation for a black publication. It was sought after by civil rights activists in the South, black politicians in the North, soldiers in Vietnam, and every segment of black society. To say merely that *Jet* was influential is an understatement, as probably best evidenced by President Lyndon B. Johnson's fury over articles I wrote in 1963, which led him to haul my publisher to the White House for a dressing down. Still, the publisher never directed me to change anything I wrote and never retracted a word either. Black life was chronicled by the black press for all the decades when the mainstream press ignored us. The archives of *Jet* and *Ebony*, and the historic Black newspapers available on various Internet databases provide a wealth of historic material for the study of this period. They have a rightful place next to Black literature as core materials for African-American studies.

JW: It's interesting you made the connection to Internet databasing for African American publishing, given *Jet*'s recent move to an all-digital format. Do you think this development was inevitable?

SB: Many people would argue that *Jet* was designed to address the needs of African Americans for news and information essential to their social and

political goals. That it did so, and did it extremely well, is evidenced by its long life over decades when many other magazines, including mainstream favorites such as the original *Colliers*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Look*, disappeared. But the needs of African Americans for news and the sources and means of getting this news have changed. That *Jet* is now digital and more entertainment-oriented than before is probably a sign of its success. Blacks now want a broad foothold in the mainstream which includes a greater share of modern media. We recognize that progress brings change, even while older folks like me still miss that little magazine that fit in our pockets, and beamed so much light as we mapped, blazed, and marched a very long road to freedom.

JW: What about your own role in the movement?

SB: I suppose that everyone sees the world through filters that reflect his or her own experiences. There were several distinguished scholars and academics in my family tree, but my aspirations always leaned toward journalism and the press. As I described in *Shocking the Conscience*, I was a product of a segregated society in Maryland and Ohio, and certainly in Virginia where I went to a black college (Virginia Union in Richmond) but it was nothing like the state-condoned, even state-sponsored, terrorism that was a fact of life in the Deep South. I knew I could never live in such an environment, and so the calls of moderates for “patience”—President Eisenhower’s being the most prominent among them—were particularly galling to me. “Freedom Now!” was more akin to my philosophy, and I was always in awe of the men and women such as the NAACP’s field staffers Ruby Hurley and Medgar Evers who braved those backwoods of Mississippi to advance the cause of black liberation. I was determined to use my journalism skills and the resources and access of our magazines to support them. It was important that no one in a position to effect positive change—whether in the white press, the Congress, the Administration or wherever—be allowed to say “I didn’t know.” In my own experience, Mr. Johnson did not interfere with my editorial judgment. He was a businessman who also was committed to the betterment of the black race. And he knew how to run a publishing empire that was both successful and dedicated to this mission.

JW: Do you see yourself as a pioneer?

SB: We were all pioneers. We went where no other reporters had ever gone or were likely to go at that time, and we brought back the facts for our readers. We reported on outrageous denials of civil and human rights and the

courageous deeds of people who were saying “no more” and “never again.” They would become our national heroes—people like Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Ruby Hurley, Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry, Amzie Moore, Daisy Bates, Diane Nash—I could go on and on. Black Americans learned their names and the impact of their heroic deeds on the pages of *Jet* magazine.

JW: Thank you, Simeon. It’s been a pleasure.

SB: Thank you.

NOTES

¹ Booker, Simeon and Carol. *Shocking the Conscience: A Reporter’s Account of the Civil Rights Movement*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013.

² “Simeon Booker, JPC Washington Bureau Chief, Honored by Black Media Group.” *Jet* (28 Dec. 1998): 46.

³ Booker, Simeon. *Black Man’s America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

⁴ Cobb, Charles E. Jr. *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

⁵ Dunnagin, Alice. *Alone Atop the Hill: The Autobiography of Alice Dunnigan, Pioneer of the National Black Press*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2015.