

Cyrus Colter (1910-2002) Papers, 1935-1995

Series 11/3/1/2

Boxes 1-5

Biography

The distinguished African-American writer and educator Cyrus Colter was born in Noblesville, Indiana, on January 8, 1910. Colter was one of two children born to James Alexander Colter and Ethel Marietta Basset Colter. His father's various jobs included insurance salesman, actor, musician and regional director of the Central Indiana division of the NAACP, which took the family from Noblesville to Greensboro, Indiana, and later to Youngstown, Ohio. Cyrus Colter graduated from Rayen Academy in Youngstown and pursued his undergraduate degree at Youngstown University (Ohio) and Ohio State. In 1940 he earned a degree from the Chicago-Kent College of Law. On January 1, 1943, he married Imogene Mackay, a teacher, who served as his supporter and critic until her death in 1984.

Colter's early life was marked by his legal and military pursuits. After a brief stint as an agent for the Internal Revenue Agency, Colter served in World War II as a field artillery captain and saw combat in Europe in the Fifth Army under General Mark Clark. In 1946, he returned to civilian life and the practice of law in Chicago. Four years later, Governor Adlai Stevenson appointed him to the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC), where his twenty-three year tenure was the longest in that agency's history.

In 1960, at the age of fifty, Colter reassessed his life's work and began an accelerated reading program that focused on Russian literature. Colter became more and more impressed with the range of characters depicted by Tolstoy, Dostoevski, and Chekhov, and he recognized the deficiency of African-American literature in this regard. When his wife challenged him to address this problem in fiction, Colter began to write. Colter's first short story, "A Chance Meeting," was published in 1960 in *Threshold*, a little magazine out of Belfast, Ireland. Ten years later, a collection of his short stories, *The Beach Umbrella* (1970), won the prestigious University of Iowa School of Letters first prize award for short fiction (chosen by Kurt Vonnegut). In the years that followed, he published countless short stories and poems, and six novels: *The Rivers of Eros* (1972), *The Hippodrome* (1973), *Night Studies* (1979), *A Chocolate Soldier* (1988), *The Amoralists and Other Tales* (1988) and *City of Light* (1993). Now widely read, his works have been translated into German, Italian, Hungarian, Danish, French, and Japanese.

Colter resigned from the ICC in 1973 in order to accept a professorship of creative writing in Northwestern's Department of African-American Studies, then two years old. A year later Colter was named as the first Chester D. Tripp Professor of the Humanities, a post he held until his retirement in 1978. Colter died on April 17, 2002.

Throughout his lifetime, Colter received countless accolades, including an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Illinois (Chicago). One of the highest honors was bestowed in 1990 when Colter's was one of the names engraved on the frieze of the new Illinois State Public Library alongside such Illinois literary figures as Upton Sinclair, Carl Sandburg, Studs Terkel and Gwendolyn Brooks.

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Description of the Series (Boxes 1-4)

This series fills four archival boxes and spans the years 1935 to 1995. It consists of biographical material, correspondence, speeches, and publications.

The biographical material is comprised primarily of awards and honors bestowed upon Colter during his distinguished career, and clippings concerning Colter and his publications.

The correspondence is divided into two categories: general correspondence, arranged chronologically, and subject correspondence, arranged alphabetically by folder title. The majority is subject correspondence, between Colter and his two publishers, Ohio University Press and Thunder Mouth Press.

The bulk of the collection consists of drafts of Colter's publications, especially his two last novels, *A Chocolate Soldier* and *City of Lights*.

Provenance: These papers were donated to the University Archives on November 11, 1997 as Accession #97-200 by Cyrus Colter via Howard M. (Scott) McHugh.

Separations: Four oversized diplomas were separated and placed in the Northwestern University archives map case (see attached list, p. 6). Some awards have been separated and placed in the Northwestern University Archives artifact collection (see list, pp. 6-7). Photographs were separated and placed in the Northwestern University photographic files. A small quantity of duplicate materials was discarded.

Restrictions: None.

Processor: Alex Strauss, February, 1998.

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Additions: 1960-1987
BOX 5 (Half-size box)

Description of the Additions

The addition consists of photocopies from literary journals dating between 1960 and 1987. Most of the items photocopied are short stories by Cyrus Colter as they were originally published; there are also reviews by Colter or of his work, and interviews with Colter. The photocopies are arranged chronologically, and the citation for each is typed on the first page. The addition includes a University of Iowa Press pamphlet containing "A Gift," a selection from *The Beach Umbrella*, the collection of Colter's stories which won the Iowa School of Letters prize in 1970.

Provenance: These articles were photocopied from journals transferred to the University Archives by the Northwestern University Library Acquisitions Department in April, 1998. The journals themselves were then transferred to the Special Collections Department of the University Library.

Restrictions : None.

Processor: Janet C. Olson, June, 1998.

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Boxes 1-5

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Dates</u>
Biographical Materials			
1	1	Personal Data	c.1935-1995
	2	Address Book/ Appointment	1961-1989
	3	Degrees, Awards, Honors	1961-1989
	4	Clippings	1953-1995
Correspondence			
1	5	Correspondence, General	1934-1997
	6	National Endowment of Humanities Application	1980
	7	Swallow Press/ Ohio University Press	1975-1982
	8	Thunder Mouth Press	1987-1994
Speeches			
	9	Dedication to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin	n.d.
Publications, Poems			
	10	The Imogene Poems	n.d.
Publications, Short Stories			
2	1	"The March", draft	1971
	2	"Technician", draft	n.d.
Publications, Books			
	3	Unknown Book, draft, incomplete	n.d.
	4	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , notes	c. 1979
	5	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , early draft, Chapters 1-23	1982
	6	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , early draft, Chapters 22-44	1982
	7	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, incomplete	n.d.
	8	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, incomplete	n.d.
	9	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, pgs. 1-175	n.d.
3	1	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, pgs. 176-361	n.d.
	2	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, incomplete	1985
	3	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, incomplete	n.d.
	4	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , draft, incomplete	n.d.
	5	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , galleys, pgs. 1-143	n.d.

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<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Dates</u>
3	6	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , galleys, pgs. 144-277	n.d.
	7	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , book jacket	n.d.
	8	<i>Chocolate Soldier</i> , student essay	1988
4	1	<i>City of Light</i> , handwritten draft	n.d.
	2	<i>City of Light</i> , draft	c.1984
	3	<i>City of Light</i> , draft, 189-317	n.d.
	4	<i>City of Light</i> , draft, 318-487	n.d.
	5	<i>City of Light</i> , draft, incomplete	n.d.
	6	<i>City of Light</i> , excerpt in <i>Callaloo</i> magazine	1991
	7	<i>Renaissance</i> , proposed book sketch	1987
Publications, Reviews			
	8	Reviews written by Colter	1985-91, n.d.
	9	Reviews of Colter's novels	1971-1997
Additions (Box 5)			
5	1	Photocopied articles, reviews	1960-1987

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SEPARATIONS:

DIPLOMAS AND CERTIFICATES

The following diplomas and certificates have been separated from this series and added to the University Archives' diploma collection:

Colter, Cyrus J.; Indiana Common Schools, Certificate of Proficiency; June 18, 1924

Colter, Cyrus J.; Haven School, Youngstown, Ohio, Diploma; June 15, 1928

Colter, Cyrus James.; Chicago-Kent College of Law, Bachelor of Laws Diploma; February 5, 1940.

Colter, Cyrus James; State of Illinois Supreme Court, License to Practice as an Attorney and Counselor at Law; June 13, 1940.

ARTIFACTS

The following artifacts have been separated from this series and added to the University Archives' artifacts collection

Plaque:

For Members Only (Northwestern University African-American student association):

From / F.M.O. / to / Cyrus Colter / Dedication & Service / to Black Students / 1978

Medal:

The Cliff Dwellers (Chicago):

The Cliff Dwellers / Merit Award:

Honoring / Cyrus J. Colter / for Distinguished Service / to the Arts in Chicago / in Recognition of His / Creative Achievement / as a Writer / MXCLXX [1970]

Plaque:

Illinois Commerce Commission:

A Tribute to / Cyrus J. Colter / Commissioner / 1950-1973 / Illinois Commerce Commission / For over two decades you have enriched / the lives of the people of Illinois by your / dedication to the highest principles of public / service and trust. // In appreciation therefore, and on behalf / of all the people of Illinois we gratefully / present this tribute. / Marvin S. Lieberman / Chairman // Dan Walker / Governor

Plaque:

African-American Alliance:

Outstanding Service to the / African-American Community / Cyrus Colter / African American Alliance

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ARTIFACTS, Continued

Trophy (glass):

Illinois Humanities Council:

1989 / Illinois Humanities Council / Public Humanities Award / Cyrus Colter

Plaque:

United States Equal Opportunity Commission:

Cyrus Colter / In Grateful Recognition / Of Your / Outstanding Contribution / In The Pursuit Of Excellence / United States / Equal Employment Opportunity Commission / Black History Month / February, 1984

Plaque:

Chicago Public Library:

Living African American / Heritage Award / Presented To / Cyrus Colter / In recognition of your contributions to / African American literature and history during / your multi faceted career as an attorney, / university professor, and noted author. / Chicago Public Library / African American History Month / February 1996