

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Moutoussamy-Ashe, Jeanne, 1951-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe,
Dates:	April 15, 2007 and January 15, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:54:30).
Abstract:	Photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (1951 -) had many exhibitions and publications that captured the African and African American experience through photography. Wife of the late tennis star Arthur Ashe, she served as the director of the Arthur Ashe Endowment for the Defeat of AIDS. Moutoussamy-Ashe was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 15, 2007 and January 15, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois and New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_008
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe was born on July 9, 1951 in Chicago, Illinois. Art has been a life-long pursuit for Moutoussamy-Ashe. Her mother, Elizabeth Moutousammy, an interior designer and father, John Moutoussamy, an architect, encouraged her artistic side. Taking advantage of the opportunities available to them in Chicago, she began her formal training at age eight when her parents enrolled her in classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. When it was time for undergraduate studies, Moutoussamy-Ashe moved east to New York and received a B.F.A. degree in photography from The Cooper Union School of Art. After graduating in 1975, she worked as a graphic artist and photojournalist for WNBC-TV. In October 1976, Moutoussamy-Ashe was hired to take photographs at the United Negro College Fund tennis event, where she met tennis great, Arthur Ashe. The two married on February 20, 1977.

Throughout her career, Moutoussamy-Ashe has had frequent group and solo exhibitions at museums and galleries around the world including the Leica Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York; the Smithsonian and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.; Galerie Herve Odermat in Paris and The Excelsior in Florence among others. Publications such as *Life* Magazine, *The New York Times*, *People* and the Associated Press have also featured her photography, disseminating it to a wider audience. In 2001, she hosted the documentary *Crucible of the Millennium*, which PBS broadcast nationwide.

Moutoussamy-Ashe also taught photography courses at the high school and college levels and continues to lecture about this subject matter at many educational and cultural institutions. Outside of the field of photography, she has been actively engaged in philanthropic efforts involving social, health, and community-based issues. As an activist and civic leader, she has served as the director of the Arthur Ashe Endowment for the Defeat of AIDS, a former

trustee of her alma mater, The Cooper Union, and a one-time Alternate Representative of the United States to the United Nations, a presidential appointment.

Her photographs contain strong narrative and documentary elements. Moutoussamy-Ashe has displayed a proclivity towards African and African American art. This is evident in the three full collections documenting her travels in West Africa or her book about the Gullah community of South Carolina, *Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay*. She reveals her immediate personal experience in *Daddy and Me*, which features photos of her late husband, Arthur Ashe, and her daughter, Camera. She has published numerous books featuring not only her own work, but also that of unknown black photographers of the past. In 2001, her fourth book of photographs was published, titled *The African Flower: The Singing of Angels*. The narrative of her photographs extends beyond a picture or a series of pictures to create a greater context for the artist herself within photography, womanhood and the African American experience.

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 15, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 15, 2007 and January 15, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois and New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (1951 -) had many exhibitions and publications that captured the African and African American experience through photography. Wife of the late tennis star Arthur Ashe, she served as the director of the Arthur Ashe Endowment for the Defeat of AIDS.

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:

Moutoussamy-Ashe, Jeanne, 1951-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Moutoussamy-Ashe, Jeanne, 1951---Interviews

African American women photographers--Interviews.

AIDS activists--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Photographer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, April 15, 2007 and January 15, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 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 Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_001_001, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe was born on July 9, 1951 in Chicago, Illinois to Elizabeth Hunt Moutoussamy and John Warren Moutoussamy, Sr. Her paternal great-grandparents migrated from southern India to cut sugarcane in Saint-Francois, Guadeloupe. There, her grandfather, Jean Marie Moutoussamy, worked as a cook on a ship that often traveled to New Orleans, Louisiana. Settling in New Orleans, he became a butcher, and met his wife, Julia Walker Moutoussamy, who was Creole. They spoke in patois, as he did not know English well. They moved to Chicago, where Moutoussamy-Ashe's father was born in 1922, and her aunt, Bernadette Moutoussamy Harris, was born in 1923. When Moutoussamy-Ashe's grandfather passed away, her grandmother and aunts doted on her father. In Chicago, her father attended St. Elizabeth Catholic School and Englewood High School. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and then studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology with funding from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act.

African American Catholics.

Saint François (Guadeloupe).

West Indies, French--Emigration and immigration.

African American families--New Orleans--Louisiana.

African American architects.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_001_002, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's father, John Warren Moutoussamy, Sr., graduated from Englewood High School and the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, Illinois. A successful architect, he worked at the Chicago firms of PACE Associates and Dubin, Dubin, Black and Moutoussamy, where he was a partner. He designed many of Chicago's structures, such as the Johnson Publishing Company building on Michigan Avenue, and the Theodore K. Lawless Gardens. His sister, Bernadette Moutoussamy Harris, was a graduate of Chicago Teachers College, and developed a mathematics curriculum for the Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich publishing company. She also served on the Chicago Board of Education, and taught line dancing at Chicago's South Shore Cultural Center. A participant in this part of the interview, Moutoussamy Harris reflects upon her life, upbringing and teaching career. Moutoussamy-Ashe recalls learning to square dance from her aunt, who was considered the matriarch of the Moutoussamy family.

Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.
United States. Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944.
African Americans--Father-daughter relationships.
African American architects.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_001_003,
TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's mother, Elizabeth Hunt Moutoussamy, was born in 1922 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. She grew up with nine siblings in Chicago, Illinois, where her mother worked as a seamstress. Her father passed away when she was eleven years old. A talented singer, she performed with Johnny Hartman and Cab Calloway, and at DuSable High School's annual Hi-Jinks talent show. However, she abandoned her aspiration for a singing career to marry Moutoussamy-Ashe's father, who became a successful architect. Moutoussamy-Ashe grew up with two older brothers on the South Side of Chicago, in a house their father designed on 89th Place. She saw performers like Peg Leg Bates and Ruby and the Romantics with her father at the Regal Theater. Moutoussamy-Ashe's father recognized her artistic interests, and enrolled her in classes at the Art Institute of Chicago when she was in elementary school. Moutoussamy-Ashe's childhood friend, Frank Stewart, later introduced her to photography.

Social values.

Funeral rites and ceremonies--Africa, West.

African Americans--Marriage.

Parents--Death.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_001_004,
TRT: 0:28:32 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe grew up in Chicago, Illinois, where she attended Burnside Elementary School and St. Joachim School. From 1965 to 1969, she was a student at Chicago's Academy of Our Lady, an all-girl, majority white Catholic school. She also took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago to develop her artistic abilities. After briefly attending Chicago's Mundelein College, Moutoussamy-Ashe moved to New York City. At the advice of a childhood friend, Frank Stewart, she applied to the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, at first unsuccessfully. Instead, she took courses at the College of New Rochelle, and studied with Garry Winogrand at the Art Institute of Chicago to develop her portfolio. After reapplying, she was admitted to the Cooper Union, where she learned from photographers like Tod Papageorge and Joel Meyerowitz, and began using a Leica range finder camera. In 1976, she participated in her first exhibition with Dawoud Bey and Frank Stewart at Ed Sherman's gallery in Harlem.

African American photographers--Exhibitions.

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--Exhibitions.

Catholic schools--Illinois--Chicago.

African American children--Education (Elementary)--Illinois--Chicago.

Art school.

Mundelein College.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Education (Higher).

Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_001_005,

TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's husband, Arthur Ashe, defeated Jimmy Connors in the U.S. Open Tennis Championships in 1968. In 1975, he won the Wimbledon singles title, and became the first African American man to rank as the number one tennis player worldwide. While working as a photographer for New York City's WNBC-TV, Moutoussamy-Ashe met Ashe at a United Negro College Fund event in 1976. After marrying the next year, they traveled to South Africa, where Ashe, an ABC Sports commentator, reported on the relationship of sports to apartheid. At the suggestion of Emory Campbell, director of South Carolina's Penn Center, Moutoussamy-Ashe's first book project focused on the Gullah culture of Daufuskie Island, South Carolina. She developed her second book, 'Viewfinders,' on black women photographers, at the same time as Ashe worked on his three-volume history of black athletes. She also describes Ashe's congenital heart condition, for which he received several bypass operations.

Ashe, Arthur.

African American social reformers.

U.S. Open (Tennis tournament).

African American tennis players.

Civil rights movements.

African Americans--Marriage.

United States Military Academy.

Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006.

Apartheid--Africa, Southern.

Congenital heart disease--Complications.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_002_006,
TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe completed a six-month independent study in West Africa while a student at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. That experience inspired her research interest in the Sea Islands, which she documented in her first book, 'Daufuskie Island.' Moutoussamy-Ashe also describes the negative impact of resort development on Daufuskie Island's Gullah population. At the time of the interview, she intended to republish the book. For her second book, 'Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers,' Moutoussamy-Ashe conducted research at New York City's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She discovered multiple African American female photographers from the 19th century, including Mary E. Flenoy. Following the book's publication in 1986, Moutoussamy-Ashe toured internationally. She then focused on her family after adopting a daughter, Camera Ashe, with her husband, Arthur Ashe. In 1988, Ashe was diagnosed with HIV, which he contracted during surgery.

African Americans--Travel--Africa, West.

Daufuskie Island (S.C.).

African American photographers.

AIDS (Disease)--Diagnosis.

Women photographers.

Art publishing--United States.

Photographs--Publishing.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_002_007,
TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's husband, Arthur Ashe, contracted HIV in 1983 from a blood transfusion while undergoing a heart bypass operation at Mount Sinai St. Luke's hospital in New York City. In 1988, he was diagnosed with AIDS, and chose not to disclose his illness until 1992, as he feared that its disclosure would negatively impact his work on causes like illiteracy and racial discrimination. During the final years of Ashe's life, Moutoussamy-Ashe created a children's book, 'Daddy and Me,' for children of parents with severe illnesses. After Ashe passed away in 1996, Moutoussamy-Ashe continued her photography career with a twenty-five year retrospective of her work at New York City's Leica Gallery. She also describes how she coped with her grief. In 2001, she launched her website, JeanneMoutoussamy-Ashe.com, and published her third book, 'The African Flower: Singing of Angels.' Moutoussamy-Ashe concludes this part of the interview by describing her hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Ashe, Arthur.

AIDS (Disease)--Complications.

Bereavement.

Widowhood.

Imus, Don.

Rutger's Women's Basketball (Basketball team).

Video Oral History Interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Section A2007_008_002_008,
TRT: 0:28:57 ?

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe was the chairperson of the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS at the time of Ashe's death in 1996. The foundation became an endowment fund for AIDS programs worldwide. To continue Ashe's legacy, Moutoussamy-Ashe launched an educational blog at ArthurAshe.org with support from Merrill Lynch and Co., Inc. and ERA404 Creative Group, Inc. In 2007, she participated in the rededication of the Arthur Ashe Tennis Center and Library in Soweto, South Africa. Moutoussamy-Ashe also shares her plan for a photography project about the process of grief after life-changing events, like the attacks of September 11, 2001. Moutoussamy-Ashe talks about her daughter, Carmen Ashe; her love of film photography; and the death of her aunt, Bernadette Moutoussamy Harris. She describes how Ashe might have responded to Don Imus' racist comment about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Moutoussamy-Ashe also reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Imus, Don.

Rutgers Women's Basketball (Basketball team).

Photography--South Africa.

Social activism.

AIDS activists.

AIDS Support Organization.

Race relations--20th century.

Ashe, Arthur.