

Newsroom

A deep dive into the African American experience

HistoryMakers database demonstrates the power of oral history to share the African American experience

February 21, 2018

Civil rights leader and U.S. Congressman John Lewis. Dr. Bernard Harris, Jr., the first African American to walk in space. Internationally known poet and author Maya Angelou. The first cellist awarded a doctoral degree from Yale School of Music, Richmond's own Ronald Crutcher.

These individuals, plus thousands more, are part of [HistoryMakers](#), a digital archive of over 2,500 oral history interviews with African Americans in all fields and walks of life, from science and industry, to education and entertainment. Its aim is to provide a unique scholarly and educational resource for exploring African American history and culture. By documenting each HistoryMaker's entire span of memories, as well as his or her family's history, the database demonstrates the power of oral history to share the African American experience.

HistoryMakers has found a home in the classroom at Yale University, Howard University, Boston University, University of Virginia, and here at the University of Richmond, where classics professor Patrice Rankine has found the database to be a valuable tool in his first-year seminar, Classical Theater and the Modern City. Students read classical plays from Greece and Rome, including Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and modern

theater classics, including outings this semester to see Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Rankine encourages them to explore distinctions between text and stage, and think about issues of race, class, and gender as experienced by characters in the time they were living in.

Rankine also incorporates field trips to local theater performances throughout the semester, giving students the opportunity to experience texts coming to life. This semester, students will attend Virginia Repertory Theatre's production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and UR Theatre and Dance's presentation of James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Both plays explore the African American experience, and have a storied history of performances dating back to the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Beyond attending the performances, Rankine wanted students to gain some context on each of the plays, and how innovative they were for the time period in which they were presented. For that, he turned to the HistoryMakers database, where his students heard from Lloyd Richards, who directed the original Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and actress Billie Allen, who appeared in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the original production of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. "Through HistoryMakers, my students learned that performance is a one-time event, but that they can also benefit from considering the 'ghosts' of these productions through the interviews," said Rankine.

Rankine had the opportunity to share how HistoryMakers was a game changer in his classroom at the organization's recent conference. "Having access to HistoryMakers enhances how I can deliver instruction in drama and performance, while also teaching my students about research and library resources," Rankine said. "For the University of Richmond, this resource also helps us achieve our strategic goals of representing diversity in our curriculum and on our campus."

Faculty and students interested in exploring the HistoryMakers database can access it through the library's website or directly at richmond.thehistorymakers.org.

Photo: Actress Billie Allen's interviews in the HistoryMakers database.

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