Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Steele, Shelby

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele,

Dates: March 30, 2002

Bulk Dates: 2002

Physical Description: 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:02:49).

Abstract: English professor Shelby Steele (1946 – ) is a political commentator, and winner of the National Book Award for, "The Content of Our Character." Steele worked at San Jose State University as a professor from 1974 to 1991, and earned an Emmy Award in 1990 for his work on, "Seven Days in Bensonhurst," a PBS Frontline documentary examining the racially motivated killing of Yusef Hawkins in Brooklyn, New York. Steele was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 30, 2002, in Monterrey, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2002_046

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Political commentator and essayist Shelby Steele was born on January 1, 1946, in Chicago, Illinois. His father, Shelby, Sr., a black truck driver, met his mother, Ruth, a white social worker, while working for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Steele considers his mixed heritage an amazing gift, which served to demystify race for him. Because both of Steele's parents were active in the Civil
Rights Movement, he grudgingly accompanied his father to numerous marches and rallies as a child.

Steele met his wife, Rita, during his junior year at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he was one of eighteen black students in his class. Steele was active in SCOPE, a group linked to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and he met Rita at an activist meeting. In 1968, Steele graduated from Coe and went on to earn his M.A. degree in sociology from Southern Illinois University. Steele attended the University of Utah, where he taught African American literature and studied for his Ph.D. After earning a Ph.D. in English in 1974, Steele was offered a tenured position at the university, but turned it down due to hostility encountered as an interracial couple in Utah.

Steele accepted a position at San Jose State University as a professor of English literature, teaching there from 1974 to 1991. He earned an Emmy Award in 1990 for his work on Seven Days in Bensonhurst, a PBS Frontline documentary examining the racially motivated killing of Yusef Hawkins in Brooklyn, New York.

Steele won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1991 for The Content of Our Character, a collection of essays on race. In 1994, Steele was appointed a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. His research there focuses primarily on race relations, multiculturalism and affirmative action.

**Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Shelby Steele was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 30, 2002, in Monterrey, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacamc SP videocassettes. English professor Shelby Steele (1946 - ) is a political commentator, and winner of the National Book Award for, "The Content of Our Character." Steele worked at San Jose State University as a professor from 1974 to 1991, and earned an Emmy Award in 1990 for his work on, "Seven Days in Bensonhurst," a PBS Frontline documentary examining the racially motivated killing of Yusef Hawkins in Brooklyn, New York.

**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:**

Steele, Shelby

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews
Steele, Shelby--Interviews

**Organizations:**
Occupations:

English Professor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).
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 Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_001, TRT: 0:31:06 2002/03/30

Political commentator and author, Shelby Steele, shares stories of his childhood in suburban Chicago. The child of an interracial marriage, Steele recounts the profound racism experienced in elementary school from the all-white teaching staff. He also discusses his parents political activism and backgrounds.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_002, TRT: 0:29:22 2002/03/30

Political commentator and author, Shelby Steele delves into his childhood experiences with racism in elementary and high school. He describes the loneliness of being one of 10 black students at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and how his father told him to be "like a pirate" and take everything he could from the education he was provided.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_003, TRT: 0:31:07 2002/03/30

Political commentator and author, Shelby Steele, discusses his post collegiate life. After graduating from Coe College, Steele worked in E. St. Louis, Illinois. Disheartened after seeing the lack of progress despite the institution of Great Society programs, Steele left to attend Southern Illinois University for his MA, then later a PhD from the University of Utah. Steele also details his thoughts on interracial marriage and the reactions he and his wife have encountered in the last three decades.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_004, TRT: 0:30:36 2002/03/30

Noted political commentator and author, Shelby Steele, discusses the impetus behind his first book, 'Content of
Our Charachter', which was based in part on his observations of the changing nature of racism and race relations in America. Steele also details the racism encountered from Mormons in Utah, while he was in graduate school. Steele also shares a family challenge in dealing with his son's deafness and efforts to ensure he was well-educated despite his handicap.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_005, TRT: 0:30:03 2002/03/30

Noted author and political commentator Shelby Steele continues the discussion of his highly praised and controversial books on race in America. He offers an extended conversation on the nature of racism, black self-help, the failure of black parents to educate their children yet cry racism and other highly charged topics.

Video Oral History Interview with Shelby Steele, Section A2002_046_001_006, TRT: 0:30:35 2002/03/30

Noted political commentator and author, Shelby Steele, concludes with his thoughts on race, black political alignment with the Democratic Party, the rejection of individuality by the black community among other topics. Steele wants to be remembered as "somebody who took a risk for his own people--took a risk of invoking their ire in order to deliver a difficult truth."