

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Early

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Early, James Counts
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Early,
Dates:	June 4, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:55).
Abstract:	Cultural heritage administrator and folklorist James Early (1947 -) had a long career in the humanities holding positions in institutions such as the Center for Folklife and Cultural Studies, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Smithsonian. Early was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 4, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_118
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cultural educator James Counts Early was born in Ocala, Florida, on January 12, 1947. Early studied Spanish at Morehouse College in Atlanta, earning his B.A. in 1969. He also spent a year studying in Panama at the Canal Zone College. After graduation, Early attended Howard University, where he received his M.A. degree in 1971, and then studied for his Ph.D. degree. While there, he also attended Georgetown University, where he studied Portuguese at the Advanced Portuguese Institute.

During his years as a student, Early worked a number of jobs that helped to shape his career. At the Martin Luther King Center, he worked in the archives and then from 1970 to 1971 as an administrative and research assistant to the director of the Institute of the Black World. In 1973, he went to work at the Smithsonian Institute as a folklore consultant and researcher. He was promoted in 1974 to the acting administrator until 1976. That year, he became an associate professor at Antioch College in Washington, D.C., and worked in research at Howard University's Institute for the Arts and Humanities. In 1978, Early became the producer, writer and host of *Ten Minutes Left*, a weekly radio show on WHUR-FM. He hosted this program for five years while working at the National Endowment for the Humanities as the humanist administrator. He worked at NEH until 1984 when he returned to the Smithsonian Institute to work as the executive assistant to the assistant secretary for public service. Since then, he has held a variety of positions including working as the assistant provost for educational and cultural programs; director of cultural studies and communication at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Studies; and director of cultural heritage policy at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

Active in many organizations, Early served on the founding steering committee of the International Network for Cultural Diversity and was the humanities coordinator of the Trans-Africa Afro Americans and Cuba Cultural Conversation Project in 2000. He has served on the board of directors of the Children's Studio School since 1993, and since 1995 on the National Black Program Consortium, a program that funds independent black filmmakers. Early is a renaissance man. He writes on the politics of culture, lectures internationally and works with those in

prison. Skilled with languages, Early is fluent in Spanish, can converse in Portuguese, reads French and has some knowledge of Mandarin Chinese.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Early was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 4, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Cultural heritage administrator and folklorist James Early (1947 -) had a long career in the humanities holding positions in institutions such as the Center for Folklife and Cultural Studies, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Smithsonian.

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:

Early, James Counts

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Early, James Counts--Interviews

Folklorists--Interviews

African American scholars--Interviews

African American historians--Interviews

African American educators--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Smithsonian Institution. Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies

Occupations:

Cultural Heritage Administrator

Folklorist

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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Early, June 4, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 1/19/2021 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 James Early, Section A2003_118_001_001, TRT: 0:30:02
2003/06/04

James Early describes his family background. His mother, Altobell Hampton, was born to Lizzy James Hampton and Harry Lee Counts in Dunnellon, Florida. Dunnellon was supported by the wood pulp industry, and the closest city to the town was Ocala, Florida, which was twenty miles away. Altobelle Hampton attended Florida Normal College in St. Augustine, Florida, where she met James Early's father, James Tweetie Early. Twenty years Hampton's senior, James Tweetie Early was born to Ora and Garfield Early in Bronson, South Carolina. He later relocated to St. Augustine, Florida, where he was a business owner. Early and Hampton gave birth to James Early on January 12, 1947. Though Early was a good father, he was an alcoholic and abused Altobelle Hampton, leading the couple to separate. Altobelle Hampton secured a job as a secretary in Tallahassee, Florida and left Early to be raised by Lizzy James Hampton in Dunnellon, Florida. The smells of Early's childhood include the soil near the Withlacoochee River and kerosene.

Folklorists--Interviews.

African American scholars--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_002, TRT: 0:30:29
2003/06/04

In 1954, James Early moved to Tallahassee, Florida to live with his mother, Altobelle Hampton. He had a difficult time adjusting to city life, and was often taunted by children at Bond Jr. High School. By the time he enrolled at Lucy Moten High School in 1961, Early lost his "country" accent and joined the Episcopal Church as a social outlet, although he did not believe in God. Early was independent as a youth, and an average student in high school. He did not have concrete aspirations as a youth, yet received an academic scholarship to attend West Virginia State University. However, his mother insisted that he apply to Morehouse College. Early was accepted, and enrolled at Morehouse College upon graduating from Lucy Moten High School in 1965. Early struggled to adapt to college, and got mixed up with a group of friends that did drugs. However, he later discovered the Canterbury House, an academic Episcopal enter where he engaged with intellectuals from across Atlanta, Georgia. His grades also improved

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_003, TRT: 0:29:15
2003/06/04

While attending Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, James Early experimented with drugs like marijuana and heroin. In 1966, he left Morehouse to attend Panama Canal College in the Panama Canal Zone, where his stepfather was stationed. He returned to Morehouse in 1967, and became

familiar with the Black Power Movement. In 1969, Early helped take over Morehouse College, where members of the university's Board of Trustees were held hostage for three days while students demanded black studies courses and the consolidation of the Atlanta University Center. Early's degree was suspended, and he worked odd jobs to support himself. On the suggestion of HistoryMaker Vincent Harding, Early applied for a Southern Education Foundation Fellowship, and studied at the Institute of the Black World from 1970 to 1971. In 1971, Early received a Ford Foundation Fellowship to pursue his Ph.D. degree at Howard University. In 1976, he quit his doctoral program, and was hired by the Smithsonian Institution.

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_004, TRT: 0:30:08
2003/06/04

As a doctoral student at Howard University, James Early studied under Vincent Peloso, and took classes with Rayford Logan. Early's classmates included HistoryMakers Haki Madhubuti and Bernice Johnson Reagon. Early was hesitant to engage with Madhubuti, as he was a Marxist and did not agree with Madhubuti's nationalist beliefs. However, Early developed a strong friendship with Bernice Johnson Reagon, who he viewed as a maternal figure. Early lacked focus, discipline, and confidence as a doctoral student. He also possessed a fluid sense of self-direction, and feared that his doctoral program would force him to adopt a single identity. Thus, Early quit the program in 1976. Early found success without a Ph.D. degree and had no desire to complete his doctoral requirements. In the late 1970s, Early began appearing on WHUR-FM radio programs with HistoryMaker E. Ethelbert Miller. Early's popularity led to his own radio show, "Ten Minutes Left." A ten minute program, the show served to make leftist beliefs accessible.

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_005, TRT: 0:29:52
2003/06/04

In 1971, James Early was on his honeymoon in Guyana, South America, when he met Gerald Davis, then Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Office of Folklife Programs. Early was later hired as a Field Researcher for the department, where he traveled across South America and the Caribbean to perform research. Early also produced several folklife festivals in the United States. Early went on to work for the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1978, but returned to the Smithsonian Institution in 1984 as executive assistant to the assistant secretary for public service. In this position, Early worked to make the Smithsonian Institution more inclusive. Early lost his job due to administrative changes in 1984, but was hired by the Smithsonian Office of Folklife Programs. Here, he battled anger from losing his previous job, and the cultural insensitivity of his colleagues. Early also described why he was drawn to Cuba, as well as his work trying to expand the notions of race, culture, and nationalism in the country.

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_006, TRT: 0:30:19
2003/06/04

James Early talked about scholars on Cuban race and culture, including Carlos Moore, Jean Stubbs and Pedro Perez-Sarduy. Early commented on the term "culture," and described how Eurocentric paradigms have shaped oppressive culture. Early argued that the psychological trauma of colonization leads people in African countries and Jamaica to bleach their skin, and that "cultural profiling" leads to the mistreatment of peoples, like Muslim women who wear burkas. Early also shared four concerns for the black community. He noted that people of African descent in the United States are not homogenous. Thus,

public policy that is developed without the consideration of the cultural distinctions of blacks is harmful. Early also worries that racism is more refined, and that African Americans will fail to take ownership of their American heritage. Lastly, Early notes that the African American community must be more critical of itself. Early closed the tape by reflecting upon his legacy and his plans for the future

Video Oral History Interview with James Early, Section A2003_118_001_007, TRT: 0:10:50
2003/06/04

James early would like to be remembered as a social being who found his own identity and engaged others, sharing and learning with others. He would also like to be known for his strong values, honesty, and generosity. He closes the interview by narrating his photographs.