

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Adjoa Aiyetoro

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Aiyetoro, Adjoa, 1946-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 23, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:24:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Lawyer and civic activist Adjoa Aiyetoro (1946 - ) was a leader in the reparations movement, and the chief legal consultant to National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. Aiyetoro also worked as the director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers on issues ranging from criminal justice to environmental justice. Aiyetoro was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 23, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_165
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer and civic activist Adjoa Aiyetoro received an A.B. degree from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1967, and two years later graduated from George Warren Brown School of Social Work with an M.S.W. degree. In 1978, she graduated cum laude from St. Louis University School of Law and was admitted to the Missouri Bar that year.

Aiyetoro worked as a community mental health specialist from 1970 to 1977. After obtaining her law degree, she served as staff attorney with the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (1978-1982) and then as an attorney with the National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation (1982-1993). As director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL) from 1993 to 1997, she intensified its advocacy efforts and strengthened the organization's fiscal position. Her legal activism within the NCBL has included criminal justice issues, the environmental justice movement, the D.C. statehood movement, and reparations for Africans and African descendants.

A leader in the reparations movement - which seeks acknowledgment that the transatlantic slave trade, slavery and colonialism were crimes against humanity - Aiyetoro is chief legal consultant to the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) and co-chairperson of the Reparations Coordinating Committee. She has also represented the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's UFORJE (United for Racial Justice: Truth, Reparations, Restoration and Reconciliation) campaign. In 2001, she was selected by the African and African Descendants Caucus to contribute to an international presentation and declaration and program of action concerning reparations.

As a visiting professor and scholar in residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Aiyetoro focused on chattel slavery and its legacy and taught a seminar on reparations. She is an adjunct professor at Washington College of Law, American University, where she teaches a course on litigating reparations for African Americans. Aiyetoro has served on the board of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR) and the Steering Committee of the National Association of Black Social Workers. She is a popular speaker at international conferences and on national and local television and radio programs. She has testified before Congress and other legislative bodies concerning issues of race, class and gender injustices within the United States.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 23, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lawyer and civic activist Adjoa Aiyetoro (1946 - ) was a leader in the reparations movement, and the chief legal consultant to National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. Aiyetoro also worked as the director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers on issues ranging from criminal justice to environmental justice.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Aiyetoro, Adjoa, 1946-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Aiyetoro, Adjoa, 1946---Interviews

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African American civic leaders--Interviews

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African American lawyers--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America

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## **Occupations:**

Lawyer

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Civic Activist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

LawMakers|CivicMakers

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## **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 Adjoa Aiyetoro, July 23, 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 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section  
A2003\_165\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:55 2003/07/23

Adjoa Aiyetoro was born Artis Burrow to Artis and Marie Brabham Burrow on April 1, 1946. Artis Burrows was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1914. He began sharecropping at the age of nine, and worked his way through Lane College. He met Marie Brabham while visiting St. Louis, Missouri, and the two married in 1940. Brabham, a graduate of Harris-Stowe Teacher's College, was born to Ira Brabham, a teacher, and William Brabham, a physician, in 1915. Her grandparents were slaves, and her grandfather was the bi-racial product of rape. Marie Burrows was a member of the St. Louis Urban League, the Missouri Human Rights Commission, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, in addition to being a teacher. Artis Burrow worked for the postal service and as a city auditor. He also worked on HistoryMaker William Clay's

Congressional campaign. As a girl, Aiyetoro loved bike rides, hearing her mother's laughter, and smelling her father's cooking. She also described being raised in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:15 2003/07/23

Adjoa Aiyetoro opposed Christian doctrine at an early age. Though her father did not agree with her views, he was open to them. In 1956, Aiyetoro enrolled at the integrated Gundlach School in St. Louis, Missouri. Here, Aiyetoro's white teachers made inappropriate comments about the black students. Aiyetoro also ended her friendship with a white student after her father refused to let Aiyetoro play at their house. In 1960, Aiyetoro enrolled at Beaumont High School, where she excelled, and was favored by her teachers as her mother, Marie Brabham Burrow, was a prominent educator in the community. Also, Brabham had deep roots in St. Louis Society: she was born to a physician, and an educator that was a St. Louis native, and her maternal grandfather and great-grandmother were enslaved in St. Louis. After graduating from Beaumont High School in 1963, Aiyetoro enrolled at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where her black consciousness increased.

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/07/23

In 1963, Adjoa Aiyetoro enrolled at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts as one of three students of African descent in her class. She maintained an active social life, and her grades suffered as a result. She was then challenged to perform better by her advisor. Aiyetoro also participated local demonstrations organized by HistoryMaker D'Army Bailey. She graduated with her B.S. degree in 1967, and then enrolled in graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where she was influenced by social worker Dorothy Harrison, to become an activist. After graduating with her M.S.W. degree in 1969, Aiyetoro began working as a mental

health social worker in the Community Mental Health Department at Malcolm Bliss Hospital. Here, Aiyetoro came to understand how the African American Experience shaped mental health issues in the black community. This motivated her to intertwine her social work and activism. Aiyetoro also commented on the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/07/23

Adjoa Aiyetoro described the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis, Missouri. Around 1973, Aiyetoro received her African name, Adjoa Asantewaa. In 1975, Aiyetoro enrolled at the St. Louis University School of Law, where she was a member of the Black Law Students Association. She then graduated with her J.D. degree in 1978, and went on to work for the Department of Justice, where she focused on criminal punishment of the institutionalized. In 1982, Aiyetoro went on to work for the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project. In 1993, Aiyetoro was hired as Executive Director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, where she represented Geronimo Pratt and Judge Lajune Lange. She also consulted with Tupac Shakur regarding his treatment in prison. Aiyetoro worked with the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression to advocate for political prisoners like HistoryMaker Benjamin Chavis. Aiyetoro commented on the term "radical," and the data surrounding U.S. criminal punishment.

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:15 2003/07/23

In 1996, Adjoa Aiyetoro successfully defended Minnesota Judge Lajune Lange from being removed from her county court seat. In 1995, Aiyetoro spoke on reparations at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Conference. Aiyetoro taught seminars on reparations as a visiting professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Washington College of Law at American University in Washington, D.C. Aiyetoro was also the Director of Administration for the Congressional Black Caucus in the 1990s. According to Aiyetoro, the Reparations Movement began with David Walker's

Appeal in 1829. Aiyetoro described General William Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, which he issued in 1865 to allow ex-slaves and refugees to settle on confiscated land. Later, the Freedman's Bureau Act enabled ex-slaves to rent or purchase land. Aiyetoro argued that the U.S. Government is legally bound to compensate descendants of slaves for free labor. Aiyetoro also described how slavery contributes to contemporary issues.

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:30 2003/07/23

Adjoa Aiyetoro has been involved in the Reparations Movement since the 1980s, whose supporters include HistoryMakers Dorothy Height and Charles Ogletree. According to Aiyetoro, Reconstruction failed to provide ex-slaves with basic aid and rights, and ex-slaves' efforts to attain rights were repressed. She contends that this cycle of repression continues today. Aiyetoro argued that reparations require systematic changes in education, healthcare, and community development, not just monetary compensation. In 1989, the H.R. 40 Reparations Bill was introduced by HistoryMaker and U.S. Congressman John Conyers. Conyers worked with Aiyetoro and other leaders of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) to model the bill after the Japanese American Redress Bill. Aiyetoro also talked about the Durban 400 Conference, an international reparations conference that was held in 2001. The United States officially withdrew from the conference in 2000, a direct refusal to address reparations

Video Oral History Interview with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Section A2003\_165\_001\_007, TRT: 0:25:10 2003/07/23

Adjoa Aiyetoro's hope for the black community is that they develop a deeper understanding and respect for their history. Aiyetoro also feels that it is important for the black community, and American society in general, to embrace all facets of their history in order to heal and move forward. Aiyetoro hopes to leave behind a legacy as a person who had a strong sense of integrity, that contributed to society, and understood that the collective was greater than the individual. Aiyetoro wishes that she



had influenced her St. Louis community more and developed a stronger sense of identity as a young person. She would like to be remembered as someone who cared, as someone who put action behind her words, and as someone who helped oppressed people and helped end oppression. She closed the interview by narrating her photographs.