

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Darlene Blackburn

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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>	Blackburn, Darlene, 1942-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 9, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:28:39).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer and choreographer Darlene Blackburn (1942 - ) founded the Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe, incorporating ethnic dancing that she studied while traveling in Jamaica and West Africa. She has worked as a dance instructor at numerous institutions and served as a choreographer for a number of productions. Blackburn was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_120
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer and choreographer Darlene Blackburn was born in Chicago, Illinois on July 12, 1942. Her mother, Cora, was a homemaker and her stepfather, Richard, worked for the Ford Motor Company. The oldest of four children, Blackburn attended the Chicago Public Schools, earning her high school diploma in 1960. She later returned to school, earning her B.A. degree from Northeastern Illinois University in 1984 and her M.S. from Chicago State University in 1987.

Blackburn began dancing at an early age, and was heavily influenced by some of her teachers, including Jimmy Payne, Tommy Sutton, Lucille Evans and Tommy Gomez. In 1963, she first started becoming aware of her blackness through Phil Cohran, her life mentor, and that same year she founded the Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe. Influenced by Margaret Burroughs to study ethnic dance, Blackburn traveled to Jamaica in 1967, studying with the Jamaica National Dance Company. She continued to study foreign dance techniques, spending time in Ghana and Nigeria in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Returning to the United States, Blackburn became the Artist-in-Residence at Purdue University in 1974, and she remained there until 1976. The following year, she, along with ten members of her dance troupe, were invited to Lagos, Nigeria, to participate in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. Following the enthusiastic response to their performance, Blackburn was invited to become the Artist-in-Residence at the University of Calabar in Nigeria, where she remained for the next three years. In 1983, Blackburn and her dancers began working with Urban Gateways – an arts education agency - in Chicago, and over the next few years they sent her throughout the Caribbean to study dance.

Blackburn has worked as a dance instructor at a number of institutions, including the Calumet Career Preparatory Academy, the Chicago Boys and Girls Club, the Goodman Theatre and Mostly Music, Inc. She has also served as choreographer for a number of productions, including “Benito Cereno” at the Goodman Theatre and “The Lion and the Jewel” at the University of Chicago. She has also been honored numerous times, including receiving the

Outstanding Achievement in Dance award from Ladies of Distinction and the Aloy Award from the Muntu Theatre of Chicago.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Darlene Blackburn was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 9, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer and choreographer Darlene Blackburn (1942 - ) founded the Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe, incorporating ethnic dancing that she studied while traveling in Jamaica and West Africa. She has worked as a dance instructor at numerous institutions and served as a choreographer for a number of productions.

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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:

Blackburn, Darlene, 1942-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Blackburn, Darlene, 1942---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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## Occupations:

Dancer

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Choreographer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 Darlene Blackburn, August 9, 2004. 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).

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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 Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:25  
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Darlene Blackburn was born on July 12, 1942 in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother, Cora Blackburn, was born in 1927. Blackburn did not know her biological father. Growing up, Blackburn spent most of her time with elders in her neighborhood of Morgan Park in Chicago, including her grandmother and great-grandmother. At the time, Morgan Park was sparsely populated so Blackburn frequently spent time in nature. She describes quilts and rugs that her great grandmother made from scraps, as well as climbing trees and catching turtles. Blackburn describes her family as social dancers. Blackburn's stepfather, Richard Blackburn, came from Robbins, Illinois. He met Blackburn's mother when she was eighteen and they married when Blackburn was about twelve years old. They later moved with young Darlene to the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Blackburn describes early memories of dancing with her family and painting the classroom windows in Shoop Elementary School in Morgan Park.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:22  
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Darlene Blackburn moved from Morgan Park to Englewood in Chicago, Illinois after her mother and stepfather bought a house in Englewood when she was around twelve years old. Initially targeted by children at school for being new, Blackburn made friends by hosting parties in exchange for dance lessons from the neighborhood children. Blackburn describes taking art classes and creating murals on the school walls at Copernicus Elementary School in Englewood. She also took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. She remembers trying to hide a poor report card from her mother. Blackburn attended the then mostly-white Lindblom Technical High School in Chicago where she experienced racial discrimination. After graduating in 1960, she attended the Chicago Teachers College (later Chicago State University) to study physical education, but later dropped out. She then taught dance classes out of her home and at local YMCAs before working at Illinois Bell Telephone Company and deciding to pursue dance professionally.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:47  
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Darlene Blackburn describes the dance scene in Chicago, Illinois in the 1960s and her mother's reservations about her becoming a dancer in the city's nightclubs. Blackburn took dance classes while working downtown at Illinois Bell Telephone Company, and going to dance clubs like the Budland on Chicago's South Side in the evenings. On one occasion, she met the famed percussionist Master Henry Gibson, who connected her with HistoryMaker Phil Cohran. Blackburn describes coming into political consciousness while dancing with Cohran's group--wearing her natural hair and African clothing. She also describes participating in On the Beach, a series of performances and workshops at Chicago's 63rd Street Beach. Seeking a similar space for colder weather, the group began the Afro-Arts Theater in the late 1960s. Blackburn describes LeRoi Jones' (later Amiri Baraka) visit to the theater, the political and racial tensions surrounding the theater, and how the theater was able to sustain itself for a time.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:36  
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Darlene Blackburn talks about the Afro-Arts Theater and the cultural activities of the Black Arts community in Chicago, Illinois during the late 1960s. Blackburn describes typical performances at the Afro-Arts Theater including HistoryMaker Philip Cohran's compositions, performances by the Jackson family, and plays by HistoryMaker Okoro Harold Johnson. Blackburn's family

allowed her to express herself freely, though they found the group's ideas and practices, such as wearing afros and not eating meat, strange. She reflects on black pride and learning spiritual practices such as yoga from Asar Hapi. In 1971, the Afro-Arts Theater dissolved and the space was taken for use by the notorious El Rukns gang. Prior to this, in 1969, Blackburn made her first trip to Ghana with the help of HistoryMaker and artist Margaret Burroughs. In her time there she studied and performed dance. When she returned, she moved in East St. Louis, Illinois, where she studied dance under HistoryMaker and dancer Katherine Dunham.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:29  
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Darlene Blackburn danced under HistoryMaker Katherine Dunham in East St. Louis, Illinois until she felt herself losing her identity as a dancer. She decided to return to Chicago in 1970, and shortly after, the Afro-Arts Theater closed permanently. Blackburn reflects on the Afro-Arts Theater and the Black Panthers. She criticized the Panthers' involvement with white women, as well as their consumption of alcohol and cigarettes. She describes the Afro-Arts Theater crowd as having been too extreme in their standards. In 1971, Blackburn made her first trip to Nigeria with her dance troupe to study traditional Nigerian dance and Yoruba culture. Upon return to the United States, she continued to teach at the Englewood Urban Progress Center and take dance classes. She offers an account of the beginnings of Muntu Dance Theatre. Blackburn toured in HistoryMaker Ossie Davis' musical 'Purlie' before relocating to New York City, where she took dance classes with instructors like James Truitte and Thelma Hill.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:44  
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Darlene Blackburn describes how she avoids injury while dancing and the benefits of learning ballet for all dancers. In 1997, she visited Nigeria for Festac 77, the Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture. Blackburn returned to Nigeria for two years to teach and start a dance troupe at the University of Calabar. She then took a hiatus, choreographing Wole Soyinka's 'Death and the King's Horseman' at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois before visiting Nigeria a third time to ensure the dance troupe's vitality. Blackburn returned to Chicago, Illinois in 1980 to teach at Columbia College and Kennedy-King College. She met various dancers, musicians, and artists in Chicago like Monifa Diane Chandler and HistoryMakers Najwa and Julian Swain. She talks about transitioning to focus on choreography for her dance troupe rather than dancing. She reflects upon her life, dance philosophy, and hopes for the black community. She concludes by reflecting on her legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Darlene Blackburn, Section A2004\_120\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:16  
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Darlene Blackburn narrates her photographs.