

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Paul Carter Harrison

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harrison, Paul Carter, 1936-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison,
Dates:	September 14, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:05:25).
Abstract:	Playwright and theater professor Paul Carter Harrison (1936 - 2021) is an expert on African American theatre and has published books including <i>Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company</i> (1995), and <i>Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora</i> (2003). Harrison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 14, 2004, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_160
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright, professor, and African American theatre expert Paul Carter Harrison was born March 1, 1936, in New York, New York. His parents, Thelma Inez Harrison and Paul Randolph Harrison, were from North and South Carolina, respectively, with backgrounds rooted in the Garvey Movement, the A.M.E. Church, and Gullah culture. Harrison's brother, Kenneth, was the first black basketball player at Villanova University. Harrison attended P.S. 113 and graduated from Commerce High School in 1952. At New York University in Greenwich Village, sixteen-year-old Harrison met cutting edge artists, writers, and musicians including Billy Dee Williams, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ted Joans, and Thelonius Monk. He transferred to Indiana University in 1953, where he met "Sweet" Charlie Brown, Freddie Hubbard, and David Baker. He was awarded a B.A. in psychology in 1957. Returning to New York, Harrison earned an M.A. in psychology and phenomenology from the New School for Social Research in 1962.

Shelving his plans for a Ph.D. in 1962, Harrison spent seven years in Spain and the Netherlands, honing his writing and experimenting in theatre. In Amsterdam he met students from Surinam with whom he dialogued about the drama of African ritual. Harrison wrote a film script, *Stranger On The Square*, and two plays: *The Experimental Leader* and *Dialogue from the Opposition*.

From 1968 to 1970, Harrison taught theater at Howard University, where his students included Phylicia Rashad, Debbie Allen, Linda Goss, Petronia Bailey, Clinton T. Davis, and Pearl Cleage. At the State University of California at Sacramento, 1970-72, he wrote and directed *Tabernacle* and directed Melvin Van Peebles' *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*. In 1973, his play *The Great McDaddy*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company, won an Obie Award. From 1972 to 1976, Harrison taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he later was professor emeritus. He wrote film scripts for *Lord Shango* (1975) and *Youngblood* (1978). In 1976, Harrison was hired as professor and writer-in-residence at the Theatre Center of Chicago's Columbia

College, where he served until his retirement in 2002. While in Chicago, Harrison directed ETA's acclaimed production of Marsha Leslie's *The Trial of One Short Sighted Black Woman* (1996) and Columbia's *Doxology* (2002). Harrison's books include *The Drama of Nommoo and Totem Voices: Plays From the Black World Repertory* (1972), *Kuntu Drama: Plays From the African Continuum* (1974), *In The Shadow of the Great White Way* (intro 1989), *Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company* (1995), and *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2003). He last lived in New York City.

Harrison passed away on December 28, 2021.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Paul Carter Harrison was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 14, 2004, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Playwright and theater professor Paul Carter Harrison (1936 - 2021) is an expert on African American theatre and has published books including *Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company* (1995), and *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2003).

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:

Harrison, Paul Carter, 1936-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harrison, Paul Carter, 1936---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Playwright

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Paul Carter Harrison, September 14, 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).

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 Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_001, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Paul Carter Harrison was born on March 1, 1936 in New York, New York. His mother, Thelma Carter Harrison, was born in Wilmington, North Carolina to Ezra Carter, who owned a grocery store and headed the local chapter of the United Negro Improvement Association. After a new Safeway supermarket led his store to close, Ezra Carter fell ill, and his family moved to New York. Thelma Carter Harrison worked as an executive assistant for the federal government and the New York City Housing Authority. Harrison's father, Paul Randolph Harrison, was a big band singer who died in 1943. His paternal grandmother, Isabel Harrison, was from the Sea Islands in South Carolina, and her Gullah heritage influenced her rituals in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) faith. Harrison's first experiences with these AME traditions was at the funeral of his paternal grandfather. Isabel Harrison also owned buildings in Harlem, where she took in boarders newly moved from the South. Harrison's mother remarried at the age of seventy-seven.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_002, TRT: 0:30:45 ?

Paul Carter Harrison was seven years old when his father died, so he never knew him well. Harrison attended P.S. 113 in New York City where his music teacher taught the Black National Anthem and African songs. While traveling on a segregated train with his mother and brother to visit family in Wilmington, North Carolina, he saw differences between the North and South. His brother, Kenneth Harrison, was the first black basketball player at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, and was forced to stay in a separate hotel when the team went south. Harrison attended New York University where he met LeRoi Jones and Thelonious Monk, whose musical style influenced his writing. Harrison dated a woman, but her father's concern regarding Harrison's lack of career plans ended the relationship. He transferred to Indiana University in Bloomington, where he faced prejudice when a local restaurant refused him service. The resulting student protests that closed the business taught him the value of collective action.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Paul Carter Harrison played stickball near the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, went to churches of many denominations and took part in promenade dates along 7th Avenue while growing up in New York, New York. Harrison and his brother Kenneth played trumpet in a black drum and bugle corps. The brothers were also avid basketball players on the playgrounds of Harlem. Kenneth Harrison played on the varsity team for Villanova University in Pennsylvania, where he was one of the team's top scorers as a sophomore, but he lost his love for the game after his coach accused him of point shaving. While at Indiana University in Bloomington, Harrison was friendly with musical talents like David Baker and Freddie Hubbard, yet he encountered racist treatment from his physiology professor. He recalls how gang politics in New York City taught him how to deal with police in West Africa and how teachers used to live in the communities where they taught, which he believes yielded a better educational experience.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_004, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Paul Carter Harrison chose to attend Commerce High School in New York City

to play basketball, but did not make the varsity team and focused on his studies instead. He played in his high school orchestra and frequented live shows with his cousin, a jazz promoter. Harrison disliked the melodramatic plays on Broadway during his youth, but was inspired by classic plays and Lorraine Hansberry's work. While at Indiana University Bloomington in Bloomington, he confronted his physiology professor for using a racist slur, after which their relationship improved. He had to confine his socializing to the campus area after racist encounters when hitchhiking. Harrison studied psychology at The New School for Social Research in New York City but before obtaining his Ph.D. he moved to Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1962 to pursue a writing career. He published a book on civil rights, 'Dialogue from the Opposition,' and returned to the United States in 1968, on the same day Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_005, TRT: 0:30:29 ?

Paul Carter Harrison's experiences as a foreigner in Amsterdam, the Netherlands inspired the script for his documentary 'Stranger on the Square.' He returned to the United States in 1968 to join the theatre department at Howard University in Washington, D.C., arriving on the day of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. His students at Howard included Phylicia Rashad, HistoryMaker Pearl Cleage and Linda Goss. Harrison rejects the idea that creating art with African roots must come from engaging with artists who are continental Africans, and describes the experience of the Afro-Surinamese migration, which he observed in Amsterdam. He traces the African roots in African American cultural forms like the zoot suit, monologues in the plays of August Wilson and hip hop. Harrison talks about the role of ritual in African-influenced art, and how linearity is deemphasized in favor of finding variations on a known text. He explicates the word Nommo, which he defines as word force coming from God.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_006, TRT: 0:29:55 ?

Paul Carter Harrison was a professor of theatre at Howard University in Washington, D.C. from 1968 to 1970. During this time he wrote and directed his first full-length play, 'Tabernacle,' and advocated for new work from African American playwrights. Due to the department chair's resistance to a full season of plays by black writers, Harrison left to take a job at Sacramento State College in Sacramento, California. There, he directed the first production of 'Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death' by HistoryMaker Melvin Van Peebles, staged a touring production of 'Tabernacle' throughout California, and wrote his play 'The Great MacDaddy,' which won an Obie Award in 1974. Harrison taught at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Massachusetts and then headed the theater department at Columbia College Chicago from 1976 to 2002. As of 2004, Harrison is working on a play about Billy Strayhorn. He offers his perspective on what defines black theatre, arguing it involves more than just black characters onstage.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_007, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Paul Carter Harrison plans to emphasize Yoruban archetypes in his upcoming production of August Wilson's 'King Hedley II,' to highlight the ritual of rebirth. He disagrees with those who push naturalistic stagings of Wilson's plays. Harrison describes the effect of the Black Arts Movement in African American theater, and praises those whose work he considers exemplary, including HistoryMaker Woodie King, Jr., Amiri Baraka and Gilbert Moses.

Rather than the presence of African American characters onstage, Harrison believes that black theatre must embody an African ritual style and poetics within the play's script and direction. He holds up Adrienne Kennedy and Ron Milner as examples of black theatre playwrights. Harrison regrets the lack of professional institutions supporting new works in black theatre. He reflects on the need to address the concerns of African American youth, and talks about theater's potential to be a transformational force in society.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_008, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Paul Carter Harrison was the director for the first production of 'The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman vs. Mammy Louise and Safreeta Mae.' To produce the play, he collaborated with the author, Marcia Leslie, to emphasize the ritualistic elements of the trial that is the play's main focus. Inspired by East Asian film, Harrison prefers to stage the plays he directs on large, open spaces devoid of furniture, and to use color, light and sound precisely. Harrison has been married five times, most recently to Wanda Malone, who works in finance and grew up in Tennessee. His daughter, Fonteyn Harrison, was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and always spends summers with her father in Spain. Harrison describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He reflects on his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Paul Carter Harrison, Section A2004_160_001_009, TRT: 0:02:21 ?

Paul Carter Harrison narrates his photographs.