

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with David Levering Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lewis, David Levering, 1936-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis,
Dates:	April 17, 2007, June 9, 2005 and March 10, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005 and 2007
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:13:35).
Abstract:	Historian and history professor David Levering Lewis (1936 -) is Julius Silver University Professor and Professor of History at New York University. He won two Pulitzer Prizes for his biographies of W.E.B. DuBois. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 17, 2007, June 9, 2005 and March 10, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_061
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pulitzer Prize winning historian David Levering Lewis was born on May 25, 1936, in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lewis's father, Yale educated theologian John Henry Lewis, Sr., was the principal of Paul Laurence Dunbar High School and his mother was a high school math teacher. After attending parochial school in Little Rock, Lewis went to Wilberforce Preparatory School and Xenia High School, both in Ohio. Moving to Atlanta, Georgia, Lewis attended Booker T. Washington High School until he was admitted to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, on a four year Ford Foundation Early Entrants scholarship. Graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Fisk University in 1956, Lewis then attended the University of Michigan Law School, but eventually earned his M.A. degree in history from Columbia University in 1959. Lewis earned his Ph.D. degree in modern European and French history from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1962.

After serving in the United States Army, Lewis lectured on medieval history at the University of Ghana in 1963. Lewis taught at Howard University, Cornell University, the University of Notre Dame, Harvard University, and the University of California, San Diego, before joining Rutgers University in 1985 as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor of History. In 2003, Lewis was appointed Julius Silver University Professor and Professor of History at New York University.

Winner of two Pulitzer Prizes for his biographies of W.E.B. DuBois, Lewis also won the Bancroft Prize and the Francis Parkman Prize. Lewis received fellowships from the Center for Advanced Study of Behavioral Sciences; the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation; the American Philosophical Society; the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Lewis also served as a trustee of the National Humanities Center; the commissioner of the National Portrait Gallery; and a former senator of Phi Beta Kappa. A former president of the Society of American Historians (2002-2003), Lewis serves on the board of the NAACP's *The Crisis* magazine.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with David Levering Lewis was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 17, 2007, June 9, 2005 and March 10, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Historian and history professor David Levering Lewis (1936 -) is Julius Silver University Professor and Professor of History at New York University. He won two Pulitzer Prizes for his biographies of W.E.B. DuBois.

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:

Lewis, David Levering, 1936-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lewis, David Levering, 1936---Interviews

African American college teachers--Interviews

New York University--Faculty--Interviews

African American historians--Interviews

Rutgers University--Faculty--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Historian

History 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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, April 17, 2007, June 9, 2005 and March 10, 2005. 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 David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

David Levering Lewis was born on May 25, 1936 to Alice Bell Lewis and John H. Lewis in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lewis' maternal ancestors were free people of color who owned slaves in Charleston, South Carolina. Later, some family members passed for white while the rest moved to Georgia. His maternal grandfather was active in the First Congregational Church of Atlanta, worked with Heman Perry's real estate firm and committed suicide when Lewis' mother was a teenager. Lewis' mother was taught by W.E.B. DuBois in high school and obtained her normal degree from Atlanta University. She taught at Booker T. Washington High School and later received her bachelor's degree from Morehouse College. Lewis' father was born in rural Georgia, attended Morris Brown College and Yale Divinity School, and received his master's degree in sociology from the University of Chicago. Lewis' parents met in Atlanta and moved to Little Rock, where his father became principal and his mother taught at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School.

African American college teachers--Interviews.

New York University--Faculty--Interviews.

African American historians--Interviews.

Rutgers University--Faculty--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_001_002, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

David Levering Lewis recounts his family's stories about the 1906 Atlanta riot, after which Jim Crow was firmly established in the city. During his early elementary school years in Little Rock, Arkansas, Lewis did not learn to read, so he was homeschooled by his mother. He played baseball and basketball with his friends and enjoyed dinner table conversations with his family. Lewis' father, John H. Lewis, along with Sue Cowan Morris, testified about the pay discrimination experienced by Little Rock's black teachers in a case argued by Thurgood Marshall. This led to his firing, and the family moved to Ohio where Lewis' father became dean of Wilberforce University's theology department. In Wilberforce, Lewis began to read, took violin lessons and learned poetry from educator and activist Hallie Quinn Brown. He attended the preparatory school affiliated with Wilberforce, then Xenia High School. Lewis recalls how a childhood friendship in Little Rock was severed due to segregation.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_001_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

David Levering Lewis attended high school in Xenia, Ohio before his family moved to Atlanta in 1950 where he enrolled in Booker T. Washington High School. After eleventh grade, he attended Fisk University through the Ford Foundation Fund for the Advancement of Education. Lewis' headmaster was William Thomas, an Oxford University graduate. Lewis was taught by notable professors such as David Granick, Aaron Douglas, Robert Hayden, Bernard Spivack and August Meier. Lewis frequented Fisk's International Student Center, where he watched French New Wave films and saw Reverend Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Ellison speak. After frequently missing roll call, Lewis was almost expelled from the university, but Charles S. Johnson allowed him to stay due to Lewis' father's appointment as president of Morris Brown College. Lewis attended the College of Wooster for a semester on an exchange program. Lewis recalls his fellow Fisk exchange students Johnnetta B. Cole and HistoryMaker Niara Sudarkasa.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_001_004, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

David Levering Lewis was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa at Fisk University in 1956. He attended the University of Michigan Law School on the advice of Professor Theodore S. Currier, and due to the fact that the State of Georgia refused to integrate its graduate schools. After one year, he transferred to Columbia University to obtain his master's degree in history instead. Lewis recalls the historian Jacques Barzun and working for Stephen P. Dunn during his time at Columbia. Lewis borrowed tuition from his neighbor, Norris Bumstead Herndon, owner of Atlanta Life Insurance Company, to attend the London School of Economics. Lewis' friend Preston King, who was later convicted of draft evasion, attended with him. Lewis lived in France and commuted to London monthly. Lewis remembers visiting a school named in his father's honor shortly before his father's death in 1958. In 1962, Lewis was drafted into the U.S. Army. He served in Germany for a year before being discharged to teach at the University of Ghana.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_002_005, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

David Levering Lewis remembers his childhood dog, Butch, who was killed when Lewis was nine years old. In 1963, inspired by Pan-Africanism and the opportunities for African American scholars, he began teaching at the University of Ghana. Lewis taught philosopher Kwasi Wiredu and worked with historian Albert Adu Boahen. The political climate in Ghana became increasingly tense after several assassination attempts on President Kwame Nkrumah and when the economy began to decline. Lewis remembers conversing with a CIA mission chief who confirmed the organization was active in Ghana before the 1966 coup. While in Africa, Lewis visited Liberia and the Ivory Coast. University of Ghana vice chancellor Conor Cruise O'Brien helped Lewis enter the country after the borders closed. Upon returning to the U.S. in 1964, Lewis taught at Howard University for a short time. He remembers the history department chair, Elsie M. Lewis, a former student of his mother's.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_002_006, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

David Levering Lewis was recruited by Vincent P. DeSantis, history department chair at the University of Notre Dame to serve as a visiting professor of French history. Lewis was unable to rent a house in South Bend, Indiana due to discrimination. After a year, he joined the faculty at Morgan College, where the history department was chaired by Benjamin A. Quarles. In 1966, he married Sharon Siskind Lewis, whom he had met in Ghana. In 1968, Lewis was asked to write a biography of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As Lewis was turning the offer down, King was assassinated, and Lewis changed his mind. He travelled throughout the South to conduct research for 'King: A Critical Biography.' Lewis describes the extensive FBI surveillance on King and his admiration for King's moral courage. Coretta Scott King and some ministers did not like Lewis' book, and it was banned in several cities. Lewis resigned from Morgan College to teach at Federal City College and write his second book,

‘Prisoners of Honor.’

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_002_007, TRT: 0:29:03 ?

David Levering Lewis was mentored by historian Benjamin A. Quarles. Lewis taught at Federal City College and worked with the editor Hillel Black at William Morrow to publish ‘Prisoners of Honor’ about the Dreyfus affair. Lewis; his wife, Sharon Siskind Lewis; and their children, Eric and Allison Lewis moved to France. While there, his son was diagnosed with autism and Lewis worked on his study of Alfred Dreyfus in France and Italy. The book was published in 1974 and was well-reviewed, as it exposed new information Lewis uncovered about the French military’s case against Dreyfus. Upon his return to the United States, Lewis negotiated with Dorothy Porter for him and Faith Berry to gain access to Alain Locke’s letters to write his book on the Harlem Renaissance, ‘When Harlem Was in Vogue.’ Lewis expounds on his book’s argument that the Renaissance was planned to advance civil rights and his research sources, which included the Dunbar News, a publication from the Dunbar Apartments in Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_002_008, TRT: 0:29:56 ?

David Levering Lewis published a book on the history of Washington, D.C. just before publishing ‘When Harlem Was in Vogue’ in 1981. The former examined the city’s history of African American activism, and Lewis interviewed figures such as D.C. Mayor HistoryMaker Marion Barry and Councilman Julius Hobson. Lewis shares his responses to reviews of ‘When Harlem Was in Vogue,’ including his disagreement with HistoryMaker Mel Watkins assignment of the review in The New York Times. Lewis separated from his wife while facing charges of not holding classes at Federal City College. He accepted an offer at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and moved while his family remained in D.C. At UCSD, he organized a civil rights conference and began writing ‘The Race to Fashoda.’ He conducted research in Ethiopia and Sudan before returning to the D.C. area to finish writing. He taught at Howard University for a year before accepting the Martin Luther King, Jr. Endowed Chair at Rutgers University.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_002_009, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

David Levering Lewis remembers meeting Du Bois at a Boule event in Wilberforce in 1948. Lewis began working on his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of W.E.B. Du Bois at the suggestion of colleagues. After offering the book to several publishers, his proposal was accepted by John Macrae, III at Henry Holt and Company. Lewis decided to add a second volume to his project when he realized he would be able to travel to the Soviet Union for research due to glasnost. On his second trip, he brokered a partnership between the Writers Guild of the Soviet Union and Rutgers University, which allowed him greater access to the country’s archives. Lewis was accompanied by the spy Ovid Gorchakov and his wife, Alia Bobricheva. Lewis also spoke to Du Bois’ family for his research, including a granddaughter, Du Bois Williams. Lewis describes Du Bois’ early development as a solitary child and teenager. He also describes Du Bois’ treatment of women, his romantic life, and his strict schedule.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_003_010, TRT: 0:31:08 ?

David Levering Lewis won the Pulitzer Prize for his two-volume biography of W.E.B. Du Bois. In this part of the interview, Lewis elaborates on his

scholarship by describing Du Bois' experience at Harvard University, where Du Bois was mentored by philosopher William James. Lewis also describes Du Bois' relationship to African American editor William Monroe Trotter and the difficulties Du Bois faced when he attempted to obtain his Ph.D. in Germany. Lewis talks about academia's reception of Du Bois' work and Du Bois' temperament. Lewis describes the legacy of Du Bois' work in the field of social science, including the influence of his book, 'The Philadelphia Negro.' Lewis also notes the significance of Du Bois' work, 'The Souls of Black Folk.' Although Du Bois' sociological work was initially ignored, Aldon Morris informed Lewis that the American Sociological Association created the W.E.B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship ASA Award in its namesake's honor.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_003_011, TRT: 0:29:54 ?

David Levering Lewis talks about his research for his two-volume work, 'W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race.' He describes Du Bois' changing tactics towards achieving civil rights throughout his career. Lewis reflects upon why learning about Du Bois should include examining Du Bois' economic critiques and why contemporary curricula would benefit from incorporating this subject. He explains Du Bois' split with the NAACP in the 1930s and recounts stories of Du Bois' eccentricities. Upon returning to academia, Du Bois wrote 'Black Reconstruction in America' which Lewis considers to be Du Bois' most important work. Lewis reflects upon Du Bois' decision to move to Ghana at the end of his life. Lewis concludes the tape by describing his own book that was about to be published at the time of the interview, 'God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 570-1215.'

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_003_012, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

David Levering Lewis was researching his book 'God's Crucible' in Morocco during the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. He remembers staying to continue research while his wife returned to the United States once the borders reopened. He was inspired to write 'God's Crucible' when he was researching his earlier book, 'The Race to Fashoda.' Lewis describes researching the history of Islam, specifically its presence in Europe. He describes the invasion of Al-Andalus; the failure of the Umayyad Empire, which led to the expulsion of Islam from Europe and religious polarization encouraged by the Catholic Church; and the genetic make-up of the Moors. Lewis also talks about his membership in various historical societies. At the time of the interview, he taught two classes at New York University, but planned to retire after a fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin.

Video Oral History Interview with David Levering Lewis, Section A2005_061_003_013, TRT: 0:16:52 ?

David Levering Lewis shares fond childhood memories of his dog, Butch, who accompanied Lewis' family during their move to Ohio. Lewis talks about his family, which includes three children and one stepdaughter. At the time of the interview, he planned to look further into his family history. Lewis describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He reflects upon his life and legacy.