

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ayoka Chenzira

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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>	Chenzira, Ayoka
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 10, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:14:57).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Animator, communications professor, film professor, and film director Ayoka Chenzira (1953 - ) created the first Master of Fine Arts degree program at the City College of New York, and is the William and Camille Cosby Endowed Professor in the Arts at Spelman College. Chenzira was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 10, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_156
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ayoka Chenzira was born on November 8, 1953, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Paul and Bernice Wilson. Chenzira was reared by her mother who owned a beauty parlor in the building where they lived in north Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Chenzira played the cello, field hockey and studied ballet for a number of years. She attended private boarding school during high school. After graduation, she attended The College of New Rochelle in Westchester, New York, where she studied film and photography. Chenzira received her M.A degree in education

from Columbia University and her B.F.A. degree in film production from New York University, where her thesis piece was *Syvilla: They Dance to her Drum*, a short film that documented the African American concert dancer, Syvilla Fort, who was her dance teacher.

As the chair of the department of media and communication arts at the City College of New York, Chenzira managed programs in advertising, public relations, journalism, film and video. She also co-created the City College of New York's first M.F.A in media arts production graduate program.

Chenzira is a prolific film artist whose works include features, performance art, documentaries, experimental productions and animation. In fact, she is considered the first African American female animator. In 2002, Chenzira was invited to serve as the first William and Camille Cosby Endowed Professor in the Arts at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, where she is creator and director of the Digital Moving Image Salon (DMIS) and teaches a year long research and production course. She also created and served as co-director of Oral Narratives and Digital Technology, a joint venture between Spelman College and the Durham Institute of Technology (DIT), where she designed and taught workshops primarily for Zulu students at DIT.

Chenzira lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and has one adult daughter.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ayoka Chenzira was conducted by Denise Gines on December 10, 2006, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Animator, communications professor, film professor, and film director Ayoka Chenzira (1953 - ) created the first Master of Fine Arts degree program at the City College of New York, and is the William and Camille Cosby Endowed Professor in the Arts at Spelman College.

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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:

Chenzira, Ayoka

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Chenzira, Ayoka--Interviews

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African American women motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

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African American women college teachers--Georgia--Atlanta--Interviews

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Women animators--Interviews

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African American women college teachers--New York (State)--New York--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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Spelman College

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Spelman College

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## **Occupations:**

Communications Professor

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Animator

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Film Professor

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Film Director

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers|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 Ayoka Chenzira, December 10, 2006. 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 Ayoka Chenzira, Section  
A2006\_156\_001\_001, TRT: 0:27:45 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira was born on November 8, 1953 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Paul Wilson and Bernice Cherry Wilson. Chenzira's maternal grandmother, Lily Walton Cherry, was the caretaker of her parents, Chanie Walton and William Walton, while her grandfather, Kelsie Cherry, worked as a stevedore during the Great Depression. Her maternal family moved from Winston-Salem, North Carolina to Philadelphia, where Chenzira's mother and five siblings were born. Chenzira describes her

mother as nontraditional woman who commuted by bicycle and roller skates, and who was ostracized by her community because she was a single mother. Chenzira's father was drafted into the U.S. Army, and her parents divorced shortly after his return. At one time, he operated his own private detective business. Chenzira grew up in The Flamingo Apartments in North Philadelphia, where entertainers like James Brown stayed. Chenzira describes her mother's most recent apartment, which overlooked downtown Philadelphia and New Jersey.

African American women motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.

African American women college teachers--Georgia--Atlanta--Interviews.

Women animators--Interviews.

African American women college teachers--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira, Section A2006\_156\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira attended Gesu School, a Catholic school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although Chenzira was not Catholic, she enjoyed her teachers and Catholic rituals, including buying stockings for her First Communion. After Chenzira was sent home with a head wound, rather than to the hospital, her mother removed her from the school. Chenzira describes herself as a curious child. Her mother, Bernice Cherry Wilson, was strict, and insisted on cooking healthy meals, but also taught her to jump rope and roller skate. Chenzira played hopscotch and marbles; baseball and dodge ball in the summers; and, in the winters, went ice skating and sleigh riding. She learned to play the piano, and danced ballet at Novak and Kowalska School of Ballet in Philadelphia. She recalls the smell of chemicals and shampoo from her mother's beauty parlor, which was located in the apartment building where she grew up, and celebrating Thanksgiving and birthdays with her extended family.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira, Section A2006\_156\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:30 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira learned ballet at Essie Marie Dorsey's

ballet school and Novak and Kowalska School of Ballet, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Chenzira does not recall racism in the diverse neighborhood where she grew up, and describes her community's sadness after President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination. She transferred from Gesu School to Steven Girard Elementary School, where she was one of three African American students. Chenzira enjoyed gym class, and remembers her principal, Ms. Love. Chenzira played the cello and piano at Philadelphia High School for Girls; studied painting, engraving and photography; and competed in gymnastics, until, unsatisfied with her coach's high jump training, she quit the team. Due to her mother's strictness, Chenzira opted to attend Lourdesmont School, a boarding school in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. She studied social science, foreign languages and the arts, and took courses at the University of Scranton. Upon graduating, Chenzira resolved to study filmmaking.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira, Section  
A2006\_156\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:01 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira was a classmate of filmmaker Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe at The College of New Rochelle in New York, then transferred to New York University, where she studied films from Italy, Germany and France, and learned cinematography from Professor Peter Glushanok. She also painted; learned dance from Syvilla Fort, who worked with Katherine Dunham; and worked part time at the New York University Medical Center. The head of the school, Haig Manoogian, tried to relegate Chenzira to video editing, but she aspired to become a director, and joined Third World Newsreel and Women Make Movies. After graduating from New York University, Chenzira attended Teachers College at Columbia University with the intention of becoming an arts educator. Chenzira reflects upon perceptions of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy; the death of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and her opinion of Malcolm X as a young woman. She also remembers learning animation to create her film, 'Hair Piece: A Film for Nappy-Headed People.'

Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira, Section

A2006\_156\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:20 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira worked with Professor George C. Stoney to direct and produce her documentary, 'Syvilla: They Dance to Her Drum,' in 1979 in honor of her dance instructor, Syvilla Fort. Chenzira married dancer Thomas Osha Pinnock, with whom she had a daughter, Haj Chenzira-Pinnock. To finance her films, she worked as an editor on Fiat commercials and at CBS news in New York City. Chenzira produced 'On Becoming a Woman' with Byllye Avery and the National Black Women's Health Project, and talks about the social impact of her films, including 'Hair Piece: A Film for Nappy-Headed People,' which explored African American women's hair trends, and the social implications of certain styles. She recalls the film's negative reception from women of African descent in London. Chenzira used her experiences as a hospital worker as inspiration for the film, 'Secret Sounds Screaming: The Sexual Abuse of Children.' She also explains why she dislikes being called the first African American woman animator.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayoka Chenzira, Section  
A2006\_156\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:01 2006/12/10

Ayoka Chenzira's film, 'The Lure and The Lore,' was inspired by her husband's experience of immigration to the United States, while her film, 'Zajota and the Boogie Spirit,' won the Sony Innovator Award for its mixed still photography and computer animation. Then, in 1993, Chenzira founded Red Carnelian Films, and began teaching at the City College of New York, where she founded the film graduate program. In 1994, Chenzira made her directorial feature film debut with 'Alma's Rainbow,' starring Victoria Gabrielle Platt and Mizan Kirby. Chenzira began experimenting with magical realism in 'In The Rivers of Mercy Angst.' She also talks about her short films, 'Sentry at the Gate: The Comedy of Jane Galvin Lewis,' 'Snowfire,' and the interactive film, 'HerAdventure,' which she directed with her daughter, Haj Chenzira-Pinnock. Chenzira transformed her screenplay, 'Flying Over Purgatory' into a multimedia stage play starring Ruby Dee and South African actress Mabel Mafuya at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Ayoka Chenzira wrote and directed the stage play, 'Flying Over Purgatory,' starring Ruby Dee and South African actress Mabel Mafuya at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, where she then became the first William and Camille Cosby Endowed Professor in the Arts. Chenzira founded and directed the Digital Moving Image Salon, a film program at Spelman, and her films were featured at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. At the time of the interview, Chenzira's plans included expanding the Digital Moving Image Salon, and completing her doctoral degree in digital media at Georgia Institute of Technology. She describes her admiration for African Americans in film, including Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee and Beverly Guy-Sheftall; and her concerns for the African American community. She shares her advice to aspiring filmmakers and her message for future generations. Chenzira also reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.