

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Caulker, Ferne Yangyeitie, 1947-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker,
Dates:	November 30, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:12).
Abstract:	Dancer and choreographer Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker (1947 -) was the founder and director of the Ko-Thi Dance Company. She began her teaching career at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1971, creating the University's first courses that covered African, Caribbean and African American dance techniques and history. Caulker was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 30, 2007, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_336
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer and choreographer Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker was born on August 9, 1947, in Sierra Leone, Africa. Caulker studied with the National Dance Company of Ghana at the University of Ghana, Legon, then returned to the United States.

In 1969, Caulker founded the Ko-Thi Dance Company after returning from Ghana. The company was created to develop, educate, showcase and preserve

African, Caribbean and African American dance and music. In the beginning, the company's entire repertoire was created by Caulker. However, through the years, she developed and nurtured veteran choreographer/dancers and musicians who now contribute into the repertoire. Over the past thirty years, Caulker has developed a cadre of commissioned works by master dancers and musicians from throughout the African Diaspora.

Caulker began teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1971, creating the University's first courses covering African, Caribbean and African American dance technique and history. Caulker then became a full professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Dance Department.

Since 1981, Caulker and the Ko-Thi Dance Company have created major full length evening works, collaborating with various international artists from across world cultures, (East Indian, Irish), and cross disciplines, (Jazz and the spoken word), merging cross cultural forms such as the South African 'Boot Dance' and Tap. In 1995, Caulker received a Fulbright Research Fellowship, which allowed her to study in Tanzania, East Africa, for three months. While doing her own research, Caulker also taught at the University of Dar es Salaam, lectured children in the Arusha United African American Cultural Center and assisted a UWASA cultural group. In 1999, Caulker served on the Blue Ribbon Commission on the Arts in Education for the Wisconsin State Superintendent, and the following year, served for the National Endowment for the Arts 2000 Dance panel. She has proudly served on the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Arts Board.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 30, 2007, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer and choreographer Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker (1947 -) was the founder and director of the Ko-Thi Dance Company. She began her teaching career at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1971, creating the University's first courses that covered African, Caribbean and African American dance techniques and history.

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:

Caulker, Ferne Yangyeitie, 1947-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Caulker, Ferne Yangyeitie, 1947---Interviews

Women dancers--United States--Interviews

African American women educators--Wisconsin--Interviews

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews

African American artists as teachers--Wisconsin--Interviews

African American dance teachers--Wisconsin--Interviews

African Americans in musical theater--Wisconsin--Interviews

Women choreographers--Wisconsin--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Ko-Thi Dance Company

University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee

Occupations:

Dancer

Choreographer

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 Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, November 30, 2007. 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).

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 Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_001, TRT: 0:30:30 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker was born on August 9, 1947 in Rotifunk, Sierra Leone to Olive Selby Caulker and Solomon Brooks Caulker. Caulker traced her paternal family to the mid-19th century, when her great-great-great-grandfather, an Englishman named Coker, married a Sierra Leonean woman of Sherbro descent. Caulker's

paternal grandmother was the matriarch of her family, including Caulker's grandfather's several wives. Caulker's father was raised as a Christian, and initiated into the Poro, a traditional men's group. Caulker's maternal grandfather emigrated from Jamaica by way of Ellis Island. He moved to Ohio, where Caulker's mother was born; and then to Nashville, Tennessee, where he worked in the A.M.E. publishing industry. Caulker's parents met at the University of Chicago; and, upon graduating, moved to Sierra Leone. There, her father became the vice principal of Fourah Bay College in Freetown. Later, her mother returned to Nashville to earn a master's degree in library science from Fisk University.

Women dancers--United States--Interviews.

African American women educators--Wisconsin--Interviews.

African Americans in the performing arts--Interviews.

African American artists as teachers--Wisconsin--Interviews.

African American dance teachers--Wisconsin--Interviews.

African Americans in musical theater--Wisconsin--Interviews.

Women choreographers--Wisconsin--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker's father moved from the Sherbro territory of Sierra Leone to Freetown, the nation's capital, for his education. He continued his studies at the University of Chicago; and, after meeting Caulker's mother there, returned with her to Sierra Leone. There, he was an ordained Evangelical United Brethren minister, and the vice principal of Fourah Bay College in Freetown. During her early childhood, Caulker lived on Mount Aureol, near the Fourah Bay College campus. She recalls the Sierra Leonean forests, and foods like fufu and Bonga. Caulker and her family sometimes visited relatives in the United States, where she experienced racial discrimination for the first time. In the 1960s, her father died in a plane crash while returning from a conference in Israel, and

Caulker moved with her mother and sister to the United States. Caulker also describes the Sande initiation, which her paternal grandmother, the village matriarch, prohibited for the women in Caulker's family.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_003, TRT: 0:28:21 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker grew up in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where she began her education at an international school, and went on to attend the Annie Walsh Memorial School. During this time, she was influenced by her father's album collection, which included classical and African music. Caulker lived for a year with her maternal grandparents in Nashville, Tennessee while her mother pursued a master's degree in library science at Fisk University. Her grandmother sometimes passed as white, and was often preoccupied with the appearance of Caulker's nose. After Caulker's father passed away, she attended the West Cornwall School for Girls in Penzance, England, and later moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where her mother joined the library faculty at Marquette University. Caulker felt disconnected from her peers at Milwaukee's Custer High School, and mostly interacted with international students from the local colleges. Upon graduation, she enrolled in the dance program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_004, TRT: 0:29:00 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker was a student at Custer High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when she learned about the work of dance anthropologists Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, who inspired Caulker to pursue her interest in African dance. Upon graduating in 1965, Caulker matriculated at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she studied primitive dance under Myron Howard Nadel. After one year, she transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she studied modern dance, and saw Judith Jamison perform with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This prompted Caulker to audition for the dance program at New York University, although she did not enroll. Rather, from 1969, she studied at the Institute for African Studies in Accra,

Ghana under dance scholars like Albert Mawere Opoku, J.H. Kwabena Nketia and John Jantuah of the National Dance Company of Ghana. Caulker describes the importance of knowing one's history, and talks about her philosophy of dance.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_005, TRT: 0:29:10 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker attended the Institute for African Studies in Accra, Ghana from 1969, and studied under members of the National Dance Company of Ghana like John Jantuah. During her stay in Ghana, she visited Elmina Castle, a slavers' fort, where she was inspired to found an African dance company in the United States, in order to provide African Americans with access to African history and traditions. She conceived of the name Ko-Thi, meaning go black, as she was returning to the United States. In the 1970s, Caulker established the Ko-Thi Dance Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with assistance from dance professionals like Rod Rodgers of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The Ko-Thi Dance Company utilized a variety of rhythms and dance styles, including the South African Isicathulo boot dance; and engaged in educational outreach through programs like Drumtalk. Caulker also talks about the challenges faced by African American dance companies like the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_006, TRT: 0:29:51 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker founded the Ko-Thi Dance Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin upon her return from Ghana in 1969. Over the next two decades, she developed the group as a professional company, and toured extensively within the United States. Then, in the 1990s, the company began touring internationally, with performances at the Mitsui Festival in Tokyo, Japan, and the Toronto arts festival in Canada. During this time, arts programs were defunded at both the state and national levels, and the Ko-Thi Dance Company's budget diminished dramatically relative to institutions like the Milwaukee Ballet and Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, which were grounded in European traditions. Caulker

reflects upon her life and legacy, as well as her hopes for the black arts community and the African American community at large. She also talks about the gentrification of Milwaukee. Caulker concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker, Section A2007_336_001_007, TRT: 0:14:20 2007/11/30

Ferne Yangyeitie Caulker narrates her photographs.