

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bethann Hardison

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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>	Hardison, Bethann, 1942-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 15, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	11 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:21:32).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Fashion consultant Bethann Hardison (1942 - ) was known for her pioneering work in revolutionizing and popularizing a more inclusive definition of beauty within the fashion industry. Hardison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 15, 2013, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_190
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Fashion activist and model Bethann Hardison was born in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from George W. Wingate High School, Hardison attended the New York University Art School and the Fashion Institute of Technology. During the 1960s, Hardison worked in the garment district of New York City as saleswoman. In 1967, she was discovered by African American designer Willi Smith and began working for Smith as a fitting model, soon crossing over to the runway and print industries. Along with Beverly Johnson, Iman, and Pat Cleveland; Hardison broke barriers in the 1970s appearing in *Allure*, *Harper's Bazarre*, and *Vogue*. In 1973, she was featured in the international Versailles fashion face off, a historical moment in which France's best designers competed against the top American designers of the time. Hardison then joined Click, a startup modeling agency, in 1980, as a booking agent where she produced fashion shows, handled public relations for design houses, and became a contributing editor at several magazines. Concerned with the politics of the fashion industry, Hardison changed her focus from modeling to activism in 1981.

Formed in 1984, the Bethann Management Agency focused on diversifying the fashion industry. Also, along with former model and friend Iman, Hardison co-founded the Black Girls Coalition in 1988 to provide advocacy and support to African American models. In 1996, Hardison turned her attention towards television where she co-executive produced television sitcoms "Between Brothers" and "Livin Large." Hardison was also named *Vogue Italia* editor at large in 2010.

Hardison's contributions in modeling and advocacy have earned her several awards throughout her career. In April of 1999, she was honored with the First Annual Vibe Style Lifetime Achievement Award. Later that year, the Magic Johnson Foundation presented Hardison with a Distinguished Service Award. The Black Alumni of the Pratt Institute honored Hardison with a 2003 Lifetime Achievement award. In 2012, she received a Woman of Power Legacy Award from Black Enterprise, and became a Frederick Douglass award recipient in 2013, for her work in promoting diversity in fashion.

Bethann Hardison was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 15, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bethann Hardison was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 15, 2013, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 11 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Fashion consultant Bethann Hardison (1942 - ) was known for her pioneering work in revolutionizing and popularizing a more inclusive definition of beauty within the fashion industry.

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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:

Hardison, Bethann, 1942-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Hardison, Bethann, 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:

Fashion Consultant

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers

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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 Bethann Hardison, July 15, 2013. 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 Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:34  
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Bethann Hardison was born on September 30, 1942 in New York City to Sophie Hudson Hardison and Lee Hardison. Her maternal grandmother, domestic worker Carrie Hudson, was born in North Carolina, where Hardison's mother

was raised. At sixteen years old, Hardison's mother moved to New York City, where she found work in domestic service. Hardison's father was born in Sudan, and grew up in North Carolina with his parents, Estell Hardison and Vance Lee Hardison, Sr. Hardison's parents met at a dance in New York City. After her parents separated, Hardison's maternal grandmother moved to New York City to help care for her. Hardison's father was Muslim, and served as an advisor to Malcolm X during his transition away from the Nation of Islam. Hardison grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, where she tap danced in nightclubs as a child. At twelve years old, she moved into her father's household in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Her father later died from lung cancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_002, TRT: 2:30:27  
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Bethann Hardison grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York, where she lived with her maternal grandmother, Carrie Hudson, and mother, Sophie Hudson Hardison. She began her education in the advanced academic track at P.S. 44, Marcus Garvey Elementary School, and went on to attend J.H.S. 35, where she became involved with a street gang. At twelve years old, Hardison was sent to live with her father, a devout practitioner of Islam who lived in Crown Heights. Hardison was bused to the majority-white George W. Wingate High School in Brooklyn. She became the school's first African American cheerleader, and was sometimes accused of acting white by her African American friends. Shortly after graduating, Hardison secured work as a telephone operator at the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. She also became pregnant and miscarried. During this time, Hardison aspired to work in criminal justice. She became the youngest corrections officer in the State of New York at nineteen years old.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:31  
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Bethann Hardison worked for two years as a correctional officer at the Westfield State Farm women's prison in Bedford Hills, New York. She then obtained a position at the Cabot Button Company, a custom button factory in New York City's Garment District. There, Hardison's supervisor was impressed with her style and demeanor, and selected her to deal directly with the clothing manufacturers. Inspired by their design showrooms, Hardison obtained a position at the Marty Gutmacher, Inc. dress company. From there, she became the assistant to Sylvia Courtney at Ruth Manchester Ltd. Under Courtney's tutelage, Hardison learned to work in the showroom, where she met fashion buyers like Bernard Ozer. He was the head of the junior dress department at Federated Department Stores, Inc., and selected Hardison to model in a fashion show. Around this time, Hardison met the pioneering black fashion designer Willi Smith, and became his muse and model. Additionally, Hardison remembers the birth of her son, Kadeem Hardison.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:56  
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Bethann Hardison served as a model and muse for black fashion designer Willi Smith's junior sportswear line, WilliWear Ltd. She left Ruth Manchester Ltd. because of a political conflict with designer Ruth Manchester, and then became Willi Smith's personal assistant. Smith encouraged Hardison to pursue modeling as a career, and introduced her to fashion photographer Bruce Weber. In 1970, she obtained her first major modeling job with designer Chuck Howard at the International Fashion Fair in Mexico City, Mexico, where she met and

befriended the Swedish designer Sighsten Herrgard. Hardison worked at WilliWear Ltd. for two years, and then began working in black fashion designer Stephen Burrows' showroom in New York City's Garment District. During this time, Hardison continued working as a runway model, and became known for her stage presence and unique appearance. Hardison also talks about the black models of the 1960s, including Pat Cleveland and Norma Jean Darden.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_005, TRT: 5:31:31  
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Bethann Hardison modeled on the runway for fashion designers like Clovis Ruffin and Issey Miyake during the early 1970s. In 1973, she was selected by designers Stephen Burrows, Anne Klein and Oscar de la Renta to model in the 'Grand Divertissement à Versailles.' The show took place at the Royal Opera House of the Palace of Versailles in France, and featured five American designers and five French designers. Originally promoted as a charity benefit, the show was dubbed a fashion battle by the press after conflict between the designers. Hardison was featured alongside African American runway models like Norma Jean Darden and Pat Cleveland, and wore simple hair and makeup to showcase the American designs. Hardison modeled a yellow dress by Halston, and received a standing ovation for her performance. Hardison also talks about her friendship with singer Josephine Baker, and describes her bohemian lifestyle during the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:58  
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Bethann Hardison was promoted from showroom model to creative director of Burrows, Inc. in 1977. In that role, she recruited supermodel Iman to model Stephen Burrows' collection. She later served as Iman's mentor in the fashion industry. At this point in the interview, Hardison describes her social circle during the 1970s, which included the pop artist Andy Warhol. Hardison frequented Warhol's New York City loft, The Factory, where she befriended African American creatives like artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and fashion editor Andre Leon Talley, as well as artist Keith Haring and actress Jerry Hall, who was the former wife of Mick Jagger. Hardison also describes her friendship with Jamaican model Grace Jones and French graphic designer Jean-Paul Goude, and talks about the career of Beverly Johnson, who was one of the first black models with a commercial look. Hardison concludes this part of the interview by describing the impact of designer Calvin Klein on the fashion industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_007, TRT: 7:33:05  
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Bethann Hardison was promoted to creative director of Stephen Burrows' design studio, Burrows, Inc., in 1977. Shortly afterwards, the studio closed down. Hardison then traveled to Europe, where she was recruited by Giancarlo Giammetti to become the marketing director for Italian designer Valentino. Hardison also worked with the Concorde Fashions Corporation, an Italian swimsuit manufacturer, to design a swimwear line called Ibiza and open a showroom in the United States. Hardison eventually left Valentino; and, in 1981, was recruited by Frances Grill to become a booking agent for Click Model Management Inc. in New York City. There, she discovered model Elle Macpherson, and collaborated with designers like Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. Encouraged by model Bonnie Berman and photographer Steven Meisel, Hardison opened her own agency, Bethann Management Co. Inc., in 1984. Hardison also talks about the underrepresentation of African Americans in the top modeling agencies of the 1980s.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:04 ?

Bethann Hardison opened Bethann Management Co., Inc. in 1984 in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood. She received financial support from model Bonnie Berman, and guidance from Elite Model Management founder Johnny Casablancas. At the agency, Hardison represented African American models like Veronica Webb, Roshumba Williams and Tyson Beckford. She also discovered British model Naomi Campbell, and became her mentor. During this time, Hardison faced racist backlash from her former colleagues at Click Model Management Inc., who expected her agency to fail because she was an African American woman. In 1988, she founded the Black Girls Coalition to provide support for young African American models, and was joined by supermodels like Iman and Tyra Banks. At this point in the interview, Hardison talks about the success of her son, actor Kadeem Hardison, on the television series 'A Different World,' where he appeared opposite Jasmine Guy. Hardison also remembers the death of designer Willi Smith.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_009, TRT: 9:28:50 ?

Bethann Hardison served as the matron of honor at the wedding of supermodel Iman and singer David Bowie in 1992. Four years later, Hardison retired and formally closed her modeling agency, Bethann Management Co. Inc. At this point in the interview, Hardison talks about the whitewashing of the fashion industry in the late 1990s, and the incorporation of casting directors into the model scouting process. In 2007, she was recruited by model Naomi Campbell and fashion editor Andre Leon Talley to speak publically about the lack of diversity in the fashion industry. Later that year, Hardison held a press conference to foster awareness about the discriminatory casting practices at modeling agencies. In response, the agencies stopped issuing casting calls that explicitly excluded models of color. In 2012, Hardison was featured in the HBO documentary film, 'About Face: Supermodels Then and Now.' She reflects upon the impact of her activism in the fashion industry.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_010, TRT: 10:27:45 ?

Bethann Hardison served as a muse, model and activist in the fashion industry for over forty years. At this point in the interview, Hardison reflects upon her life, career and legacy. She describes her hopes and concerns for the black fashion community, and shares her advice to aspiring African American fashion professionals. Hardison also talks about the challenges of the building a career in the fashion industry, especially for young models. Hardison concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Bethann Hardison, Section A2013\_190\_001\_011, TRT: 11:22:51 ?

Bethann Hardison narrates her photographs.