

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Margo Jefferson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jefferson, Margo, 1947-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson,
Dates:	January 20, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:47:53).
Abstract:	Professor and arts critic Margo Jefferson (1947 -) won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1995 while working as a culture critic at The New York Times. She was the author of 'On Michael Jackson,' and the National Book Critics Circle Award winning memoir, 'Negroland.' Jefferson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 20, 2017, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_007
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Professor and arts critic Margo L. Jefferson was born on October 17, 1947 in Chicago, Illinois, to Ronald and Irma Jefferson. Jefferson graduated from the University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1964. She earned her B.A. degree in English and American literature from Brandeis University in 1968, and went on to earn her M.S. degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1971.

In 1973, Jefferson was hired as an associate editor for *Newsweek* magazine, where she worked until 1978. In 1979, she joined the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at New York University as an assistant professor. Jefferson was hired as a contributing editor by *Vogue* magazine in 1984, where she wrote arts reviews and essays until 1989. She also served as a contributing editor to *7 Days* magazine in 1988 and 1989. Jefferson returned to New York University as an assistant professor in 1989, where she taught critical writing and features until 1991, when she was hired as a lecturer of American literature, performing arts criticism, writing, and English at Columbia University. In 1993, Jefferson accepted a position at *The New York Times* as a book and arts critic. She was then promoted to Sunday theater critic in 1995, and became critic-at-large in 1996. She is a professor of writing at Columbia University, and has also served as a visiting associate professor at Eugene Lang College and The New School for Liberal Arts in New York City.

Throughout her career, Jefferson has been a contributing critic to many other publications, including *Grand Street*, *The Nation*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Village Voice*, *Ms.*, *The Soho Weekly News*, *Dance Ink*, *Lear's*, *Harper's*, *Alt*, *Denmark*, and *NRC Handelsblad*. She has written and performed two theater pieces at The Cherry Lane Theatre and The Culture Project. Jefferson is also the author of *On Michael Jackson*, which was published in 2006. Her memoir *Negroland*, was published in 2015 and received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography in 2016, the Bridge Prize, the Heartland Prize and was short-listed for the Baillie Gifford Prize.

Jefferson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1995, and has received the Alumni Achievement Award from Brandeis University and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Columbia University School of Journalism. In addition, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Rockefeller Foundation /Theater Communications Group grant, and has served as a senior fellow for the National Arts Journalism Program.

Margo Jefferson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 20, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Margo Jefferson was conducted by Harriette Cole on January 20, 2017, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Professor and arts critic Margo Jefferson (1947 -) won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1995 while working as a culture

critic at The New York Times. She was the author of 'On Michael Jackson,' and the National Book Critics Circle Award winning memoir, 'Negroland.'

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:

Jefferson, Margo, 1947-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Jefferson, Margo, 1947---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Journalism Professor

Arts Critic

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Margo Jefferson, January 20, 2017. 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 Margo Jefferson, Section
A2017_007_001_001, TRT: 1:30:27 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson was born on October 17, 1947 in Chicago, Illinois to Irma Armstrong Jefferson and Ronald Jefferson. Her paternal relatives moved from Virginia to Mississippi in the late 19th century. Some of her paternal family members, like her great uncle, chose to pass as white. Jefferson's maternal grandmother, Lillian McClendon Armstrong, was from Holly Springs, Mississippi, where she graduated from Rust College. She met her husband, James Armstrong, in St. Louis, Missouri, and the couple moved to Lafayette, Indiana for his graduate pursuits at Purdue University. Jefferson's mother was born there, and returned to St. Louis with her mother after her father died in 1918. They eventually moved to the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. There, Jefferson's grandmother worked as a dressmaker before she became one of the city's first African American policewomen, and real estate investor. Jefferson's mother attended the University of Chicago, where she pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson, Section

A2017_007_001_002, TRT: 2:26:26 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson's father spent his early childhood in Coffeerville, Mississippi, where his mother was a teacher and his father was a construction worker. Following an argument between Jefferson's grandfather and the white townsmen, the family moved to Denver, Colorado. They eventually settled in Los Angeles, California, where Jefferson's grandmother worked as a dress fitter at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. In the summers, Jefferson's father apprenticed with Eddie Schmidt, who was the tailor for celebrities like Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. His two brothers went on to become judges, and his sister became a teacher. He attended Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, and completed his residency in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he met Jefferson's mother. Upon completion of his U.S. Army service, the couple settled in the Park Manor area of Chicago, Illinois; and he worked as a pediatrician at Provident Hospital. Jefferson and her sister, Denise Jefferson, attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson, Section
A2017_007_001_003, TRT: 3:29:50 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson completed her primary and secondary education at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in Chicago, Illinois, where she honed her writing skills. At this point in the interview, she talks about her hair care practices, and societal beauty standards. She also describes her challenges with nearsightedness that necessitated corrective surgery and glasses, although she switched to contact lenses as a teenager to boost her confidence. During the summers, Jefferson took piano lessons at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in Interlochen, Michigan, where she also became interested in the theater. Jefferson's sister, Denise Jefferson, trained under Edna McRae, who was one of the first white dance instructors in Chicago to accept African American students. As an undergraduate student, Denise Jefferson discovered the modern dance choreography of Martha Graham and Donald McKayle; and went on to serve as director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City for over twenty years.

Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson, Section
A2017_007_001_004, TRT: 4:33:22 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson graduated from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in Chicago, Illinois in 1964. She went on to attend Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, where she studied American literature and co-founded a black student organization. Upon graduating, she joined a theater group in Cambridge, Massachusetts whose performance of the black power piece 'Riot' earned an Off-Broadway Theater Award. Jefferson then moved to New York City, where she worked as a secretary at Planned Parenthood. Aspiring to a career in cultural criticism, she received her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. Jefferson was then hired as a book critic at Newsweek, where her colleagues included Sylvester Monroe and Ruth Ross. She left the magazine after five years, at which time she contributed to publications like the Village Voice and Vogue, and taught at Columbia University. In 1993, she was hired as a book reviewer at The New York Times. She talks about her struggle with depression.

Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson, Section
A2017_007_001_005, TRT: 5:32:19 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson worked as a cultural critic for over thirty years, during which time she reviewed the works of figures like Toni Morrison and Suzan-Lori Parks. In the early 2000s, she performed her one-woman show, 'Sixty Minutes in Negroland,' at the Cherry Lane Theatre and Culture Project in New York City. For the piece, she incorporated childhood experiences, including ones of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in Chicago, Illinois. In 2007, Jefferson published her book 'On Michael Jackson,' which received mixed reviews. After leaving The New York Times, she taught in New York City at Columbia University's School of the Arts and the Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts. At this time, she utilized the Guggenheim fellowship to write 'Negroland: A Memoir,' which also featured stories of African American women like Mary McLeod Bethune. She describes her hopes for the memoir's readership. She also talks about the women's movement and the challenges

faced by the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Margo Jefferson, Section
A2017_007_001_006, TRT: 6:15:29 2017/01/20

Margo Jefferson published her book, 'Negroland: A Memoir,' in 2016. She describes her concept of Negroland, which she created to represent the factual history of racial struggle, along with its associated myths. At the time of the interview, Jefferson planned to participate in the Women's March that took place on January 21, 2017 in Washington, D.C., in which protestors expressed their discontent for the instatement of President Donald John Trump. She shares her admiration for First Lady Michelle Obama, who responded gracefully to challenges against herself and her husband, President Barack Obama, while in office. Jefferson reflects upon her life and legacy. She concludes the interview by sharing her advice to aspiring writers and young African American women.