

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Pearl Cleage

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Cleage, Pearl
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Pearl Cleage,
Dates:	September 23, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:19:30).
Abstract:	Playwright Pearl Cleage (1948 -) has written three novels, including, 'What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day,' which was an Oprah's Book Club selection and a New York Times bestseller. Cleage has been involved in the Pan-Africanist Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement. She has also been a pioneer in grassroots and community theater. Her father, Albert B. Cleage Jr., was the founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Cleage was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 23, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_177
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright Pearl Michelle Cleage was born on December 7, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts. Cleage is the youngest daughter of Doris Graham and Albert B. Cleage Jr., the founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. After graduating from the Detroit public schools in 1966, Cleage enrolled at Howard University, where she studied playwriting. In 1969, she moved to Atlanta and enrolled at Spelman College, married Michael Lomax and became a mother. She graduated from Spelman College in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in drama.

Cleage has become accomplished in all aspects of her career. As a writer, she has written three novels: *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (Avon Books, 1997), which was an Oprah's Book club selection, a *New York Times* bestseller, and a BCALA Literary Award Winner, *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (Morrow/Avon, 2001), and *Some Things I Never Thought I'd Do*, which was published in 2003. As an essayist, many of her essays and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Essence*, *Ms.*, *Vibe*, *Rap Pages*, and many other publications. Examples of these essays include *Mad at Miles* and *Good Brother Blues*. Cleage has written over a dozen plays, some of which include *Flyin' West*, *Bourbon at the Border*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, which returned to Atlanta as part of the 1996 Cultural Olympiad in conjunction with the 1996 Olympic Games. In addition to her writing she has been an activist all her life. Starting at her father's church, The Shrine of the Black Madonna – Cleage has been involved in the Pan-Africanist Movement, Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement. She has also been a pioneer in grassroots and community theater.

Cleage is the mother of one daughter, Deignan, the grandmother of one grandson, Michael, and one granddaughter, Chloe Pearl. She is married to Zaron W. Burnett, a writer with whom she frequently collaborates.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Pearl Cleage was conducted by Jodi Merriday on September 23, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Playwright Pearl Cleage (1948 -) has written three novels, including, 'What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day,' which was an Oprah's Book Club selection and a New York Times bestseller. Cleage has been involved in the Pan-Africanist Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement. She has also been a pioneer in grassroots and community theater. Her father, Albert B. Cleage Jr., was the founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna.

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:

Cleage, Pearl

Merriday, Jodi (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cleage, Pearl--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Playwright

Fiction Writer

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 Pearl Cleage, September 23, 2004. 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 Pearl Cleage, Section A2004_177_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Pearl Cleage was born in Springfield, Massachusetts on December 7, 1948. Her mother, Doris Graham Cleage, grew up in Detroit, Michigan and eventually taught in its public schools. Cleage's maternal grandparents, Mershell Graham

and Fannie Mae Turner Graham, migrated from Alabama when her grandfather was hired by the Ford Motor Company, and attended the Plymouth Congregational Church in Detroit. Her father, Albert B. Cleage, Jr., the oldest of seven children, was a minister, and was drummed out of pastorships in Springfield and Detroit for his radical views on race. Eventually, he founded Central Congregational Church in Detroit and the Freedom Now political party. Cleage's parents divorced when she was six years old. She remembers bike rides with her sister Kristin Cleage Williams, soul food with her family and visiting grandparents on Detroit's east side. Cleage attended Roosevelt Elementary School, McMichael Junior High School and Northwestern High School in Detroit, and wanted to become a writer.

Video Oral History Interview with Pearl Cleage, Section A2004_177_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Pearl Cleage was torn between pursuing careers in dance and writing while at Northwestern High School in Detroit, Michigan, but went with writing for its greater longevity. She was very close with her father, the preacher Albert B. Cleage, Jr. His political views and use of rhetoric influenced her writing. She also accompanied him to political meetings and volunteered for the Freedom Now Party, which he started. Cleage graduated high school in 1966 and entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. to pursue a B.F.A. in playwriting. After leaving an abusive fiancé, she transferred to Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Members of Cleage's family, especially her maternal grandfather, had warned her against moving to the South, but she thrived there, working first for The King Center, then the Southern Education Program and then as a writer for WXIA-TV. She continued writing poems that she would perform at political rallies, and observed the marginalization of women in the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Pearl Cleage, Section A2004_177_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Pearl Cleage began identifying herself as a feminist in the mid-1970s in response to the disinterest in women's issue among progressive political groups, including the Civil Rights Movement. Cleage worked as a speechwriter for Maynard Jackson's 1973 mayoral campaign in Atlanta, Georgia. She became press secretary after his election. Cleage left after two and a half years because the arduous job was inhibiting her ability to continue her own writing. She did public relations writing then worked as a freelance writer for Essence and Ms. magazines, and wrote columns for the Atlanta Gazette and the Atlanta Tribune. In 1981, Cleage wrote 'puppetplay' for Just Us Theatre Company as a part of the Atlanta New Play Project, and its success led the company to hire her as a playwright in residence. There, she developed the Club Zebra performance series and met her second husband, Zaron W. Burnett, Jr. In 1990, Cleage published her first book, 'Mad at Miles: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth,' to address domestic violence.

Video Oral History Interview with Pearl Cleage, Section A2004_177_001_004, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Pearl Cleage was approached by HistoryMaker Kenny Leon of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, to commission plays for him to direct. Cleage's play 'Flyin' West' premiered in 1994. She wrote 'Blues for an Alabama Sky,' which starred her former Howard classmate, Phylicia Rashad. She and Leon cowrote 'Bourbon at the Border.' Cleage first novel, 'What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day,' was rejected by Cleage's editor, but on the advice of HistoryMaker Bebe Moore Campbell, Cleage hired an agent who got the novel published. It was selected for Oprah's Book Club and was on The New York Times Best Sellers list for nine weeks. Cleage has written four more novels, including her first third-person narrative. She reflects on her life, including

raising her daughter and her love for her two grandchildren, and on the importance of life stories and storytelling for preserving history. Cleage describes her hopes for the women's rights movement and her future writing plans. She offers advice for aspiring writers.

Video Oral History Interview with Pearl Cleage, Section A2004_177_001_005, TRT: 0:22:30 ?

Pearl Cleage moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1969, and while she originally planned to stay for only a few years, she fell in love with the African American community in the city and has remained ever since. She cites the community in Atlanta as an important influence on her writing and career. Cleage considers her values and beliefs, describes how she would like to be remembered, and reflects upon her legacy. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.