

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cleo Parker Robinson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Robinson, Cleo Parker
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson,
Dates:	June 21, 2002 and November 4, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2002 and 2008
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:28:06).
Abstract:	Artistic director and dancer Cleo Parker Robinson (1948 -) served as the founder and creative executive director of the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble. Robinson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 21, 2002 and November 4, 2008, in Denver, Colorado. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_121
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Artistic director and dancer Cleo Parker Robinson Cleo Parker Robinson was born on July 17, 1948 in Denver, Colorado. She almost died at age ten when her kidneys shut down and a segregated Dallas hospital did not admit her quickly enough to prevent heart failure. A doctor told her she would remain bedridden her entire life, but Robinson refused to believe that. She threw herself into dancing in order to overcome the pain of her body and the racism she faced. Today, she is the executive artistic director and choreographer of the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble.

Robinson began teaching dance at the University of Colorado at the age of fifteen. She graduated from the Colorado Women's College (now Denver University), having focused on dance, education and psychology. She studied with legendary dancer and humanitarian Katherine Dunham and then founded her own company in 1970. The mission of this ensemble is to foster appreciation, access and the development of new audiences for dance. Robinson attempts to educate audiences about the rich heritage and ancestral gifts on which this predominately African American ensemble draws through a year-round dance school, an international summer dance institute and national and international performances. Robinson also seeks to ensure the arts are carried on by future generations. A program called Project Self-Discovery (PSD) demonstrates her commitment to youth outreach. PSD provides the arts to at-risk Denver youth as an alternative to gang activity, substance abuse and other tragic possibilities. The Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble has performed in prisons, and some inmates have worked for the company after release. Robinson firmly believes in the healing power of art and that dance is a universal language.

Robinson has collaborated with many people on diverse projects, from operas such as *Aida* and *Carmen* to commissions with mentor Maya Angelou. She has worked with Marin Alsop, conductor of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, on such pieces as *Porgy and Bess* and Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. She has been granted choreography fellowships from the Colorado Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the

Lila Wallace Foundation, among others. Robinson was featured in the Gordon Parks film, *Run Sister Run*. She serves as first vice president of the International Association of Blacks in Dance and as a Denver Center for the Performing Arts Board of Trustees member.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cleo Parker Robinson was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on June 21, 2002 and November 4, 2008, in Denver, Colorado, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Artistic director and dancer Cleo Parker Robinson (1948 -) served as the founder and creative executive director of the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble.

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:

Robinson, Cleo Parker

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Robinson, Cleo Parker--Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

African American dance teachers--Interviews

Women choreographers--Interviews

Racially mixed people--Interviews

African American families--Texas--Dallas

Dallas (Tex.)--Race relations

Denver (Colo.)--Race relations

African American actors--Colorado--Denver

Near-death experiences

Race awareness

African Americans--Medical care

Health services accessibility--United States

Single-parent families

Segregation in education--Colorado--Denver

Art therapy

University of Denver

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble

Occupations:

Dancer

Artistic Director

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 Cleo Parker Robinson, June 21, 2002 and November 4, 2008. 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 Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_001_001, TRT: 0:30:28 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson first describes photographs of herself and publicity photos from performances by the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble. After slating her interview, Robinson talks about her family's interracial origins and her siblings, one of whom died in his sleep from a genetic ailment that she shares. Robinson then talks about her parents' musical aspirations and how her father changed his career path to acting. Lastly, Robinson talks about the racial experience while growing up in both Dallas and Denver.

African American dancers--Interviews.
African American dance teachers--Interviews.
Women choreographers--Interviews.
Racially mixed people--Interviews.
African American families--Texas--Dallas.
Dallas (Tex.)--Race relations.
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African American actors--Colorado--Denver.
Near-death experiences.
Race awareness.
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Health services accessibility--United States.
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Segregation in education--Colorado--Denver.
Art therapy.
University of Denver.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_001_002, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson reflects on the Denver neighborhood of her youth. She then shares a story that details the difficulties her parents encountered while trying to marry. Robinson remembers traveling with her parents and tells some of the problems they faced when attempting to find lodging in new towns. She also recalls her father's personality and how he inspired her and acted as a role model. Robinson talks about her father's acting roles and his theater company in Denver. She mentions plays in which he acted and roles he played. She then recalls her feelings about suddenly being separated from her father and discusses the possible reasons for his departure. Robinson talks about her racial awareness and tells how both the black and white communities in Texas discriminated against her. Cleo Parker Robinson recalls almost dying as a child and her family's dealings with a segregated hospital.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_001_003, TRT: 0:29:36 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson explains how her brush with death at age ten left her temporarily mute, yet allowed her to connect with her spirituality. She then details her observations of the world around her as a child and how she used dance to connect with others. Robinson then describes her experiences in an all-white high school in Denver when she decided to make dance her career. She then shares stories of when she regained her voice and her discovery in high school that she had half siblings. Robinson then talks about the healing power of the arts and her love for teaching dance. Lastly, Robinson details her experiences at Colorado Women's College in Denver, and the pride she felt in getting her father hired as director of the new theater there.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_002_004, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson was born on July 17, 1948 in Denver, Colorado to Martha Mae Roberts Parker and Jonathon Parker. At twelve years old, she competed as a track and field athlete in the Junior Olympics. Later, Robinson attended George Washington High School in Denver, Colorado, where most of her classmates were Jewish or Protestant. Around this time, she became a modern

dance instructor under the mentorship of Rhoda Gersten at Denver's John F. Kennedy Child Development Center. Robinson was then hired by the Neighborhood Youth Corps in Brighton, Colorado. There, she taught dance to underprivileged youth, and developed an interest in choreography and dance therapy. After graduating from high school in 1966, Robinson became the first person in her family to attend college when she enrolled at Colorado Women's College in Denver. During her first year, she lived at home. In 1968, the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. strengthened the college's visibility as a model of diversity and inclusion.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_002_005, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson studied ballet and international dance forms under the instruction of Rita Berger at Colorado Women's College in Denver, Colorado. Inspired by the scholarship of dancers like Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, Robinson took classes with Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell in New York City. Upon graduating in 1970, Robinson married her high school sweetheart, Tom Robinson, and went on to become an elementary school teacher. Then, she was hired as the dance director of the Model Cities Cultural Center in Denver's Five Points neighborhood. In this role, Robinson worked with musician Joe Keel and public relations director Bob Ragland to develop the organization's dance department. She also began to expand her own company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance. At this point in the interview, Robinson talks about her early choreography, including the pieces 'Spiritual Suite,' 'Sometimes I feel like A Motherless Child' and 'Mary Don't You Weep.' Her company also regularly performed Milton Myers' 'Rain Dance.'

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_002_006, TRT: 0:28:22 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson started her company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance, while attending Colorado Women's College in Denver, Colorado. Her dance studio eventually moved to the former site of the Shorter Community A.M.E. Church in the predominantly black Five Points neighborhood. Robinson often hosted entertainers such as Twyla Tharp, Eartha Kitt and Judy Pace-Flood. As a dance instructor, Robinson became acquainted with Katherine Dunham, and trained in the Dunham Technique. In the late 1980s, Robinson commissioned the work of Talley Beatty; and he choreographed the piece 'Ellingtonia' for her company. Robinson also worked with psychology professor Harvey Milkman to create the Projects Self Discovery program, which mentored young gang members. The award winning program lasted 10 years. At this point in the interview, Robinson talks about her philosophy of dance instruction, including the importance of being exposed to various dance forms. She also remembers one of her founding ensemble members, Curtis Fraser.

Video Oral History Interview with Cleo Parker Robinson, Section A2002_121_002_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Cleo Parker Robinson served as the creative executive director of Cleo Parker Robinson Dance, a company that she co-founded with Schyleen Qualls in the late 1970s in Denver, Colorado. In the ensemble's founding years, Qualls introduced her to the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou, which informed the maturation of Robinson's own artistry and artistic process. Robinson went on to choreograph a number of pieces, including 'Run Sister Run,' which was about the fugitive experiences of Angela Davis; 'Blood River' which was about South African apartheid; and 'Granny Dances to a Holiday Drum,' which she co-created with Denver-based poet and storyteller Opalanga

D. Pugh. 'Run Sister Run' was later adapted to film, for which artist Gordon Parks composed the music. Robinson reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered. She shares her advice to African American youth, and then she concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.