

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta

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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>	Cravotta, Ayisha McMillan, 1978-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 19, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:48:03).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer Ayisha McMillan Cravotta (1978 - ) is a ballerina who became the first African American dancer to play the role of Clara in <i>The Nutcracker</i> . McMillan Cravotta was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 19, 2007, in Charlotte, North Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_178
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ballerina Ayisha Nell McMillan Cravotta was born on February 21, 1978 in Golden Valley, Minnesota. In 1981, McMillan moved with her family to Oak Park, Illinois. McMillan began dance at the age of two at the Academy of Movement and Music and soon dreamed of becoming a ballerina. At the age of eleven, McMillan joined MOMENTA, the resident dance company of the Academy of Movement and Music. From 1989 to 1993, she danced with the Bryant Ballet, based in Chicago, where Homer Hans Bryant, former principal dancer with the Dance Theater of Harlem, became her mentor. With the Bryant Ballet, McMillan flourished in the multicultural environment where classical ballet and African dance forms were explored side by side.

At a young age, McMillan made extraordinary sacrifices for her craft. During the summer months, beginning in 1989, she attended the Boston Ballet School in Massachusetts where she was mentored by ballet great, Elaine Bauer. In addition, McMillan was selected for private instruction by Asaf and Mikhail Messerer of the Bolshoi Ballet. Later, Asaf Messerer lived in McMillan's Oak Park home while he taught McMillan. She also received pre-professional intensive training in classical ballet and early American modern dance. She traveled between Oak Park, Boston and Houston, Texas and trained with the Houston Ballet during summer break.

In 1990, at age twelve, McMillan danced in the Soviet-American ballet production of *Coppelia*. She also attended the Soviet-American Ballet School. At thirteen, she attended the Von Heideke Ballet School. In 1992, when McMillan was fourteen years old, she won a full scholarship to the Houston Ballet Academy. After high school, McMillan attended Rice University, where she graduated as an anthropology and art history major while dancing professionally with the Houston Ballet.

In 2002, McMillan left Texas and joined the North Carolina Dance Theater where she danced in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* among other productions. In 2004, she became the first African American dancer to play the role of Clara in *The Nutcracker*. McMillan retired from the stage in 2007 at the age of 29. McMillan was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 19, 2007.

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta was conducted by Cheryl Butler on June 19, 2007, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dancer Ayisha McMillan Cravotta (1978 - ) is a ballerina who became the first African American dancer to play the role of Clara in The Nutcracker.

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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:

Cravotta, Ayisha McMillan, 1978-

Butler, Cheryl (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Cravotta, Ayisha McMillan, 1978- --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:

Dancer

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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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 Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, June 19, 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 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 Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:23 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta was born on February 21, 1978 in Golden Valley, Minnesota to Connie Van Brunt and Robert McMillan, Jr. Her maternal grandfather, Godwin Van Brunt, Jr. was from San Diego, California, and worked for Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. Cravotta's maternal grandmother, Dr. Vida Van Brunt, was a Choctaw freedmen. Dr. Brunt received her Ph.D. from

the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and became a college professor. Jazz singer Edith Wilson, who portrayed Aunt Jemima, was Cravotta's mother's godmother. Cravotta's paternal grandparents were Robert McMillan, Sr., a mechanical engineer, and Kurt McMillan, an executive secretary. Cravotta's mother attended the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts and worked for Johnson Publishing Company as the founding editor of Ebony Jr! Cravotta's father attended Kent State University and Temple University and became a real estate developer. Cravotta describes her early childhood in Golden Valley, Minnesota.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta's mother and grandmother were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. Her mother and sister had debutante cotillions with The Links. In 1981, Cravotta's family moved from Golden Valley, Minnesota to Oak Park, Illinois where they were the neighborhood's only black family. Cravotta attended Grace Lutheran School in River Forest, Illinois with her younger sister, Marcia. She developed an early love for ballet and began dancing at the Academy of Movement and Music in Oak Park as well as in the MOMENTA dance troupe. Older black role models in Cravotta's early training included Tanya Wideman and Sarita Smith Childs. Around the age of nine, she began private ballet lessons with Homer Hans Bryant. Beyond ballet, Cravotta was also trained in modern dance and jazz dance. She participated in summer intensive training programs, studying in places like the Boston Ballet School where she met international dancers. One of Cravotta's most memorable early performances was dancing in "Victor/Victoria".

Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:49 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta participated in intensive summer training programs as an aspiring ballet dancer. At the Boston Ballet School, she studied with Elaine Bauer and met many international dance students. Around the age of twelve, Cravotta was cast in the Soviet American Ballet's production of "Coppelia" where she met Mikhail and Asaf Messerer, ballet masters of the Bolshoi Ballet. Asaf Messerer, later stayed with Cravotta's family and gave her private instruction. With her sets sight on Harvard University, Cravotta was equally serious about her academic studies and wanted to become an architect. Cravotta recalls the challenges of balancing ballet with school as well as the difficulty of her parents' divorce. A member of the first class of women admitted to Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Illinois. Cravotta transferred to Houston Ballet Academy at age fifteen. She describes her experience there, including her first date at age seventeen. Cravotta also talks about body image issues she faced as a dancer.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta studied privately with Homer Hans Bryant before joining his ballet company, Bryant Ballet, as a teenager. As a young dancer, she admired black ballerinas like Virginia Johnson and Stephanie Daphne. Cravotta had the opportunity to dance with another idol, Nina Ananiashvili, while at the Houston Ballet. Cravotta applied to colleges nearby ballet companies, and ultimately chose to attend Rice University in Houston, Texas while dancing professionally for the Houston Ballet where she was mentored by Lauren Anderson, another black ballerina. Her first professional ballet performance in Houston was "Swan Lake". Another performance with the Houston Ballet took

Cravotta to the Kennedy Center where she met Debbie Allen. After six years, Cravotta joined the North Carolina Dance Theatre where she became the company's first black Clara in "The Nutcracker." Cravotta also talks about racism and microaggressions encountered by black ballet dancers who are often passed over for leading roles.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta attended Rice University in Houston, Texas part-time while dancing full-time with the Houston Ballet. After six years with the Houston Ballet, she joined the North Carolina Dance Theatre and also enrolled in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. At North Carolina Dance Theatre, Cravotta became the first African American in the company's history to dance the role of Clara in "The Nutcracker." She describes her preparation for the role, dancing the role of Clara as a woman of color, confronting racist aesthetics in the ballet world, and the audience's reception of her performance. One of Cravotta's career highlights was dancing the role of Tinker Bell in Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux's "Peter Pan." Cravotta talks about her decision not to dance with a black ballet company. She also recalls her memorable appearance as the Grand Marshal of the 2005 Bud Billiken Parade. Cravotta retired from the stage in 2007 after a hip surgery. She recalls her last performance and her family's support.

Video Oral History Interview with Ayisha McMillan Cravotta, Section A2007\_178\_001\_006, TRT: 0:22:35 ?

Ayisha McMillan Cravotta retired from her dancing career after performing in Alonzo King's ballet, "Salt" in 2007. During her decade long career, Cravotta saw little change in the ballet world's willingness to embrace black ballerinas. As a dancer, Cravotta has been inspired by ballerinas like Lauren Anderson, Janet Collins, and Nina Ananiashvili. She talks about her decision to pursue ballet as well as Asaf Messerer's impact on her dancing career. The son of Cravotta's first mentor, Mrs. Samachson, would later marry Cravotta's mother. After retiring from ballet, Cravotta stayed with the North Carolina Dance Theatre and worked in its marketing department. Cravotta concludes her interview by reflecting upon her legacy and narrating her photographs.