

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lalita Tademy

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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>	Tademy, Lalita
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 18, 2015 and November 7, 2012
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2012 and 2015
<b>Physical Description:</b>	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:18:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Author Lalita Tademy (1948 - ) served as the vice president and general manager of Sun Microsystems before becoming a best selling novelist with <i>Cane River</i> and <i>Red River</i> . Tademy was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 18, 2015 and November 7, 2012, in Menlo Park, California and San Francisco, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2012_240
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author and corporate executive Lalita Tademy was born in 1948 in Berkeley, California to Nathan Green Tademy, Jr. and Willie Dee Billes. She was the youngest of four siblings, including two older sisters, Theodorsia and Joan, and an older brother, Lee. In 1956, her family moved to Castro Valley, California, where her father worked as a contractor. She attended A.B. Morris Junior High School and Castro Valley High, where she was a National Merit Scholar. In 1964, Tademy was accepted at Howard University in Washington, D.C. with a full academic scholarship. Two years later, she transferred to the University of California at Los Angeles. Tademy graduated with her B.S. degree in psychology in 1970 and in 1972, she earned her M.B.A. degree from the Graduate School of Management at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Tademy worked for the Bay Area Rapid Transit, Memorex Corporation, and ITT's printer company, Qume. In 1985, she helped found ALPS America, a unit of Japan's ALPS Electric Company, where she was in charge of marketing high-performance dot-matrix printers. Tademy was hired as Vice President and General Manager of Sun Microsystems in Silicon Valley in 1992. In 1995, she quit her executive position to pursue other passions. Tademy researched her family history intensively for three years before deciding to write a novel. In 2001, her first novel, *Cane River*, was published to much acclaim and was featured on the Oprah Winfrey Show. The book chronicled the lives of her maternal ancestors. In 2007, she published her second novel, *Red River*, whose content was also drawn from her family history research.

Tademy was featured in *Fortune*'s "People on the Rise" column and *Ebony*'s "Speaking of People" feature in 1989, and in 1998, she was named as African American Innovator in the New Millennium at the Silicon Valley Tech Museum of Innovation. In 2001, *Cane River* was chosen as part of Oprah's Book Club Series, and became a New York Times bestseller. *Red River* was selected as Border's Interactive Book Club Pick in 2007 and as an *Essence* Book Club Pick in 2008. Tademy lives with her husband, corporate executive Barry Williams, in Menlo Park, California.

Lalita Tademy was interviewed by the *The HistoryMakers* on November 7, 2012.

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# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lalita Tademy was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson and Larry Crowe on December 18, 2015 and November 7, 2012, in Menlo Park, California and San Francisco, California, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Author Lalita Tademy (1948 - ) served as the vice president and general manager of Sun Microsystems before becoming a best selling novelist with *Cane River* and *Red River*.

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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:

Tademy, Lalita

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Tademy, Lalita--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:

Author

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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 Lalita Tademy, December 18, 2015 and November 7, 2012. 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 Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:15 ?  
Lalita Tademy was born on December 26, 1948 in Berkeley, California to Willie Billes Tademy and Nathan Tademy, Jr. Tademy's maternal great-grandfather,

Joseph Billes, immigrated to the United States from southern France. He settled in Louisiana, where he worked in the timber industry. He began a relationship with a formerly enslaved woman named Emily Fredieu Billes. Although they could not legally marry, the couple raised several children, including Tademy's maternal grandfather, Theodore Billes. Tademy's great-grandfather set aside an inheritance for his children, but he was murdered and dispossessed of his fortune because of his interracial relationship. From that time, Tademy's maternal great-grandmother raised her children on her own in Colfax, Louisiana. There, Tademy's maternal grandfather married Eva Brew Billes, who gave birth to Tademy's mother in 1921. Tademy also talks about her paternal great-great-grandfather, Sam Tademy, who chose to use a variation of his African name as a surname.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:54 ?

Lalita Tademy's father, Nathan Tademy, Jr., was descended from an Egyptian sailor who was sold into slavery in Louisiana. After emancipation, her paternal great-great-grandfather, Sam Tademy, refused to use his former slaveholder's name, and chose a variation of his African name, Tateme. He settled in Colfax, Louisiana, where he helped guard the courthouse after the elections of 1873. That year, the town elected a slate of Republican candidates, and the courthouse was attacked by white supremacists in retaliation. The white mob set fire to the building and murdered over one hundred black men. Several of Tademy's ancestors were killed, while her paternal great-great-grandfather escorted the women and children to safety. After the massacre, nine white men were charged, but they were deemed innocent by the U.S. Supreme Court. The ruling encouraged white violence against the African American community in Colfax. Fearing for their lives, few people passed on the history of the massacre to the next generation.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:17 ?

Lalita Tademy's paternal great-great-grandfather, Sam Tademy, built the Grant Parish Training School to educate African Americans in Colfax, Louisiana. He rebuilt the school after it was burned down, and Tademy's paternal great-grandfather, Jackson Tademy, became a schoolteacher. Many years later, Tademy's parents met as schoolchildren in Louisiana. Her father studied briefly at Grambling State University, and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. After his discharge, he found work as a contractor in Berkeley, California, and sent for Tademy's mother and two older siblings. Faced with housing discrimination in Berkeley, Tademy's parents decided to partner with four other African American families to buy land in the all-white town of Castro Valley, California. There, they encountered hostility from their neighbors, who offered to buy the property back at a high price. Tademy's family frequently received threatening phone calls, and she was harassed by a white neighbor on her walk to school each day.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_004, TRT: 4:29:55 ?

Lalita Tademy attended Longfellow Elementary School in Berkeley, California until the fourth grade, when her family integrated Castro Valley, California. There, she enrolled at Parsons Elementary School, where she was initially rejected from the honors program because of her race. Tademy was a strong student, and received support from her teachers. They encouraged her to write, and often gave her supplementary assignments. Even so, Tademy was often the only African American student at her schools in Castro Valley, and was usually excluded from her peers' social activities. In 1962, she entered Castro Valley High School, where she was nominated to attend a National Science Foundation

summer program at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Upon graduating in 1966, Tademy enrolled at the historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C. There, she was discouraged from pursuing law on the basis of her gender, and opted to study psychology instead.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:33 ?

Lalita Tademy decided to leave Howard University after two years of study. She was discouraged by the social unrest in Washington, D.C., and hoped to be able to focus on her coursework at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She completed her bachelor's degree there in 1970, and then enrolled at UCLA's Graduate School of Management. After receiving an M.B.A. degree in 1972, Tademy secured a position in the newly formed computer division of the Xerox Corporation, where she was responsible for hardware sales. After eighteen months, she moved to New York City to work in the marketing division of Philip Morris Inc. One year later, she returned to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she worked in marketing for the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. In 1978, Tademy was hired as a product manager at the Memorex Corporation. She was the highest ranking woman in the company and one of the few employees with expertise in marketing.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:07 ?

Lalita Tademy joined the marketing team at ITT Qume in 1981. Four years later, she was hired by a Japanese technology company called Alps Electric (USA), Inc., which was looking to expand into U.S. markets. There, Tademy was eventually promoted to vice president and general manager. She began training to become the manager of all U.S. operations, but opted to leave the company in 1992, when she was recruited to become a vice president and general manager at Sun Microsystems, Inc. In 1995, Tademy decided to leave Corporate America, and began working on her family genealogy. She initially wrote short family histories, and later decided to compile a book. She obtained documents in Colfax, Louisiana, and recruited two genealogical specialists to translate them from old French. Over the course of three years, Tademy wrote her first book, 'Cane River,' about her mother's family history. After it was published in 2001, she began work on 'Red River,' which chronicled the history of her paternal family.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:30 ?

Lalita Tademy was the author of 'Cane River,' a work of historical fiction inspired by her maternal family history. She used her female ancestors as characters in a story about the history of slavery in Louisiana, and incorporated pictures and documents from her genealogical research. In 1999, after fourteen drafts and many rejections, Tademy found an agent willing to represent 'Cane River.' She made additional revisions over the summer, and received several offers from publishing houses that fall. 'Cane River' was published in 2001 and became especially popular among people of color and women, who connected with the characters in the book. After the novel was selected for Oprah's Book Club, it became a New York Times bestseller. Tademy went on to write 'Red River,' which focused on her father's family history and the events of the Colfax massacre. The book was not as well received as 'Cane River,' which was incorporated into public school curricula.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_008, TRT: 8:32:38 ?

Lalita Tademy grew up in Castro Valley, California, a nearly all-white town in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upon graduating from high school in 1966, she decided to enroll at the historically black Howard University, where she struggled to adjust to the new social environment. On campus, the Black Power

and anti-war demonstrations interfered with her education, and occasionally resulted in class cancellation. Tademy had aspired to become a lawyer, but was discouraged by reports of sexism in law firms, and decided to study psychology instead. After her sophomore year, Tademy transferred to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she earned a degree in psychology and statistics. She was repeatedly offered secretarial positions, and decided to pursue a graduate degree in order to be taken seriously in the workforce. Tademy opted to enroll at UCLA's Graduate School of Management. There, she was one of ten African American students in her program and one of the few women to pursue an M.B.A. degree.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_009, TRT: 9:30:42 ?

Lalita Tademy was one of four African American women at the University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Management. Upon graduating in 1972, she began working for the Xerox Corporation, which had recently launched a computer division in Los Angeles, California. After one year, Tademy moved to New York City to become a brand manager for Philip Morris, Inc. She soon returned to California, and began working in marketing for the Bay Area Rapid Transit system in 1975. Three years later, Tademy joined the Memorex Corporation as a product manager, making her the top ranking woman in the company at the time. When her division was purchased by the Burroughs Corporation, Tademy was asked to manage the firm's operations on the East Coast. She declined the offer, and worked briefly for a small recordkeeping company called TAB Products Co., LLC, until joining ITT Qume as a product and marketing manager. In 1985, she was recruited to become a marketing manager at Alps Electric (USA), Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_010, TRT: 10:28:35 ?

Lalita Tademy was recruited by Anne Adams, her former supervisor at ITT Qume, to join Alps Electric (USA), Inc. Together, they developed the U.S. division of the company, which was headquartered in Japan. With support from the company's executives, who trusted her expertise regarding the U.S. market, Tademy hired an American team to sell computer hardware components to companies like Apple Computer, Inc., IBM and Dell Inc. She went on to become the division's vice president and general manager. She traveled frequently to Japan and learned about Japanese business customs, which often included informal negotiations at night. After seven years, Tademy was expected to take over all U.S. operations, but she was reluctant to accept the promotion. She was headhunted by Sun Microsystems, Inc., where she negotiated for a vice presidency with stock options. Tademy accepted the position in 1992, and began managing the corporation's printing and imaging business. She worked at Sun Microsystems, Inc. for three years.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_011, TRT: 11:30:35 ?

Lalita Tademy left Sun Microsystems, Inc. in 1995, after a twenty-year career in the technology industry. At that time, she decided to take a three-year vacation to travel and explore her interests. During her first year, Tademy began working on her family genealogy, and decided to turn the project into a historical fiction novel. She had always been a strong writer, and dedicated herself to the writing process for nine months. Over the next two years, Tademy continued revising the manuscript, which she titled 'Cane River.' In 1999, she enrolled at a writing class at the University of California, Berkeley. Her professor praised the book, and referred Tademy to a publishing agent. After a final revision, 'Cane River' was published in 2001. The novel was listed as a New York Times bestseller for seventeen weeks, and was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for Oprah's Book Club.

Tademy was invited to appear on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show,' but her flight was cancelled because of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_012, TRT: 12:31:48 ?

Lalita Tademy met her husband, Barry Williams, after she published 'Cane River' in 2001. Tademy went on to write 'Red River' about her paternal family history, and found that it was more difficult to publish because of its focus on male characters. After it was released, the book garnered less attention than 'Cane River,' which received extra publicity from Oprah's Book Club. For her third book, Tademy focused on the story of Cow Tom, an African chief of the Native American Creek Nation. She first learned about the story through Jonathan Greenberg's book, 'Staking a Claim,' which focused on Cow Tom's great-grandson, Jake Simmons. For her research, Tademy made several trips to Oklahoma, where she studied Cow Tom's family and the relationships between African Americans and Native Americans. During this time, Tademy continued to host speaking engagements and lectures for 'Cane Creek'; and, in 2015, the book was chosen as assigned reading for the incoming freshman class at Stanford University.

Video Oral History Interview with Lalita Tademy, Section A2012\_240\_002\_013, TRT: 13:18:58 ?

Lalita Tademy reflects upon her life and her plans for the future. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Tademy concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.