

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sherrilyn Ifill

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ifill, Sherrilyn A.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill,
Dates:	August 29, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:42:35).
Abstract:	Nonprofit director and law professor Sherrilyn Ifill (1962 -) taught at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, and served as the President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. Ifill was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 29, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_012
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Nonprofit director and law professor Sherrilyn Ifill was born on December 17, 1962 in New York, New York. Ifill graduated from Vassar College in 1984 with her B.A. degree in English, and went on to receive her J.D. degree from New York University School of Law in 1987.

From 1987 to 1988, Ifill served as a senior fellow with New York's American Civil Liberties Union office. She then worked as assistant counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund from 1988 to 1993. While there, Ifill litigated the landmark case of *Houston Lawyers' Association v. Attorney General of Texas* in 1991 which declared that the second article of the Voting Rights Act covered judicial elections. In 1993, Ifill accepted a faculty position as professor of law at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, focusing on civil procedure and constitutional law. She also co-founded one of the first legal clinics in the nation dedicated to eliminating the legal barriers placed on recently released criminal offenders looking to re-enter society. Her book *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century* was published in 2007. In 2012, Ifill was chosen as President and Director-Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In this role, she led the litigation proceedings for *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013 and *Fisher v. University of Texas Austin* in 2016.

Ifill is the recipient of numerous awards including the Award for Professional Excellence from Harvard Law School's Center on the Legal Profession and the M. Shanara Gilbert Human Rights Award from the Society of American Law Teachers. She served as the commencement speaker in 2015 for both Bard University and her alma mater, New York University where she was also awarded honorary doctorate degrees. A frequent guest and contributor on CNN, NBC, ABC, C-Span, National Public Radio, Ifill served on the boards of Equal Justice Works, the National Constitution Center, the Learning Policy Institute, the National Women's Law Center as well as board chair of U.S. Programs for the Open Society from 2011-2013.

Ifill and her husband have three children.

Sherrilyn Ifill was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 29, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sherrilyn Ifill was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 29, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Nonprofit director and law professor Sherrilyn Ifill (1962 -) taught at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, and served as the President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.

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:

Ifill, Sherrilyn A.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ifill, Sherrilyn A. --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Nonprofit Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 Sherrilyn Ifill, August 29, 2016. 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 Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_001, TRT: 1:29:25 ?
Sherrilyn Ifill was born on December 17, 1962 in Queens, New York to Myrtle Ifill and Lester Ifill, Sr. Her parents emigrated from Panama, where her paternal grandmother worked as a domestic. Ifill's father was born in 1924, and came to

New York City as an electrician. In Harlem, he became a social worker, and the leader of HARYOU-ACT. His brother, minister O. Urcille Ifill, Sr., was the father of broadcast reporter Gwen Ifill, and their families were close during Ifill's childhood. Her mother raised ten children, of whom Ifill was the youngest; and passed away from breast cancer when Ifill was five years old. Her father later remarried. Ifill grew up in the majority black Jamaica neighborhood of Queens, where she often watched the news on television, and listened to the New York Mets' and New York Yankees' games on the radio with her father. He also brought Ifill and her siblings to New York's state parks on the holidays. Ifill was bused to the Flushing neighborhood for school.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_002, TRT: 2:31:20 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill was raised by her father, Lester Ifill, Sr., and stepmother in Queens, New York. Her family was active in the African Methodist Episcopal church; and she and her nine siblings followed strict rules, spending most of their time at home. There, Ifill often read books from the Baisley Park Library; and was influenced by U.S. Representatives Barbara Jordan and Shirley Chisolm, whom she saw on television. Ifill was bused to P.S. 219 and J.H.S. 218 in Queens' Flushing neighborhood, and served as editor of her junior high school newspaper. She went on to the culturally diverse Hillcrest High School, where she wrote for the school's literary magazine and newspaper, and was influenced by her English teacher, Lenore Vanora. Although Ifill did not play sports, she enjoyed basketball as a spectator, and followed the New York Mets and New York Yankees with her father. With her older siblings, she listened to musical artists like The O'Jays, Main Ingredient and James Brown.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_003, TRT: 3:28:25 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill grew up in a large, close-knit household in Queens, New York, where she was supported by her nine older siblings. Her father, Lester Ifill, Sr., encouraged her intelligence; and, from an early age, she aspired to be a lawyer. Upon graduation from Hillcrest High School, Ifill attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she had been offered a scholarship. She majored in English and was socially active; and, during the summer, worked for the Lutheran World Service. Ifill's professor, Norman Hodges, introduced her to problem of South African apartheid; while Professor Moses Nkondo took her to hear James Baldwin give a lecture. During her junior year, Ifill studied in Spain through the Vassar-Wesleyan Program; and met her husband, German student Ivo Knobloch, during an introductory course in Santiago de Compostela. Ifill went on to attend the New York University School of Law, where she developed an interest in civil procedure during her second year.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_004, TRT: 4:34:03 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill often debated racial politics with her peers at the New York University School of Law in New York City. While a law student, she interned with Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and worked as a human rights intern at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. She intended to practice international human rights law, and began a fellowship at the American Civil Liberties Union in New York City upon graduating in 1987. Ifill went on to join the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., where her first case dealt with the provisions of the Voting Rights Act in regard to judicial elections in Houston, Texas. She was supervised by LDF attorney Lani Guinier, and advised by former LDF attorney Pamela S. Karlan. In 1988, Ifill married Ivo Knobloch, a German man; and was briefly estranged from her father, Lester Ifill, Sr., who disapproved of the interracial marriage. Although Ifill and her husband often visited Germany, they raised their children

as African American.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_005, TRT: 5:35:34 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill remained at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. for five years, before leaving to teach at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law in Baltimore. There, Ifill taught civil procedure; and created a clinical program for first year students with assistance from her colleagues, including Richard Boldt, Barbara Bezdek and Karen Czapanskiy. Ifill's students assisted with cases, including a lawsuit to halt construction of a highway that would divide an African American community on Maryland's Eastern Shore. With her students, Ifill researched the history of the Eastern Shore, and found that its black communities had frequently been displaced by infrastructure development. This research led laid the foundation for Ifill's first book, 'On the Courthouse Lawn,' which studied the effects of three lynchings that took place on the Eastern Shore in the early twentieth century, based upon interviews with elders who were present at the time.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_006, TRT: 6:31:12 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill was mentored by Professor Taunya Lovell Banks while teaching at Baltimore's University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. She was also encouraged by attorney Derrick A. Bell, Jr., who suggested that she finish her book, 'On the Courthouse Lawn,' through a writer's residency. For three weeks, Ifill lived at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire while completing her manuscript, which revealed the lingering effects of three lynchings that took place on Maryland's Eastern Shore during the early 20th century. In 2012, Ifill became the director counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) after the sudden death of her predecessor, John Payton. During her tenure, she created a COO position, and a rapid response team to handle events like the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, and the contaminated water crisis in Flint, Michigan. She also planned to expand the reach of the LDF's litigation, and educate the public on the organization.

Video Oral History Interview with Sherrilyn Ifill, Section A2016_012_001_007, TRT: 7:32:36 ?

Sherrilyn Ifill began her tenure as the director counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) in 2013. Around this time, a number of African Americans were killed by police officers, and provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1968 were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in the decision of Shelby v. Holder. In response to these events, Ifill sought to increase the media presence of the LDF, and to partner with the affected communities to seek legal redress. Ifill reflects upon the legacy of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision in 1954, and the intergenerational civil rights effort that followed. She talks about the Dream Defenders, a group of young activists who organized in response to the murder of black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012. She also describes her hopes for the LDF and the African American community, and reflects upon the legacy of her father, HARYOU-ACT director Lester Ifill, Sr.