

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ntozake Shange

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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>	Shange, Ntozake
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange,
<b>Dates:</b>	February 1, 2017 and September 12, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016 and 2017
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:41:12).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Playwright and author Ntozake Shange (1948 - 2018) wrote the award-winning Broadway play and choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf, which was published in book form, and adapted into a 2010 film. Shange was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 1, 2017 and September 12, 2016, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_042
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Playwright and author Ntozake Shange was born Paulette L. Williams on October 18, 1948 in Trenton, New Jersey to Paul T. Williams, an air force surgeon, and Eloise Williams, an educator and psychiatric social worker. Her family regularly hosted artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Paul Robeson, and W.E.B. DuBois at their home. Shange graduated cum laude with her B.S. degree in American Studies from Barnard College in New York City in 1970. While pursuing her M.A. degree in American Studies from the University of Southern California, Shange began to associate with feminist writers, poets and performers. In 1971, she adopted her new name, *Ntozake*, meaning “she who comes with her own things,” and *Shange*, meaning “she who walks with the lions,” from the Xhosa language. She graduated from the University of Southern California in 1973.

Upon joining Malifu Osumare’s dance company, Shange met Paula Moss, and their subsequent collaborations led to the invention of Shange’s work, the choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. The work was initially produced Off-Broadway in 1975 at the New Federal Theatre in New York City, moving to the Anspacher Public Theatre in 1976. After premiering on Broadway at the Booth Theatre later that same year, the play went on to win the Obie Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and the AUDELCO Award. Originally conceived as a choreopoem, it has been published in book form, and adapted into a stage play. In 2010, Tyler Perry wrote, produced and directed the film adaptation, *For Colored Girls*, starring Whoopi Goldberg, Phylicia Rashad, Janet Jackson, and Loretta Devine.

In 1978, Shange released *Nappy Edges*, a collection of fifty poems celebrating the voices of defiantly independent women. In 1979, she produced the *Three Pieces* trilogy of choreopoems, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. In 1982, Shange released her first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, which she followed with *Betsy Brown* in 1985 and *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* in 1994. Shange’s work also appeared in *The Black Scholar*, *Yardbird*, *Ms.*, *Essence* magazine, *The Chicago Tribune*, *VIBE*, and *Third-World Women*. In addition to

poetry, novels, essays, and screenplays, Shange published four books for children: *Whitewash* (1997); the tribute to Muhammad Ali, *Float Like a Butterfly* (2002); *Ellington Was Not a Street* (2003); *Daddy Says* (2003); and *Coretta Scott* (2009). She also served on the faculty of the Department of Drama at the University of Houston.

An Emmy, Tony, and Grammy award nominee, Shange received an NDEA fellowship in 1974, two Obie Awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1981, the Paul Robeson Achievement Award in 1992, the Living Legend Award from the National Black Theatre Festival in 1993. She was inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Shange passed away on October 27, 2018.

Ntozake Shange was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 12, 2016 and February 1, 2017.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ntozake Shange was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 1, 2017 and September 12, 2016, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Playwright and author Ntozake Shange (1948 - 2018) wrote the award-winning Broadway play and choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf, which was published in book form, and adapted into a 2010 film.

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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:

Shange, Ntozake

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Shange, Ntozake--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:

Playwright

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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 Ntozake Shange, February 1, 2017 and September 12, 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).

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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 Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:28 ?

Ntozake Shange was born on October 18, 1948 in Trenton, New Jersey to Eloise Owens Williams and Paul T. Williams. Her maternal grandfather, Frank Owens, was born in Allendale, South Carolina, where his father passed as white to serve as the county sheriff. Shange's grandfather trained as a master carpenter at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and moved to New York City with his wife, Viola Murray Owens, during the early 1920s. In New York City, Shange's mother attended Hunter College and became a psychiatric social worker. Shange's paternal family migrated to Canada via the Underground Railroad, and later settled in Long Island and Lakewood, New York. There, Shange's grandfather owned a window washing business. Her father studied surgery at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, and completed his residency at the Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. Shange received her name from two South African exiles in 1971, and began using it exclusively in 1973.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:29 ?

Ntozake Shange was one of four children born to Eloise Owens Williams and Paul T. Williams. Her older sister, Ifa Bayeza, became a playwright, while her younger sister, Bisa Williams, served as the U.S. ambassador to Niger. Her brother, Paul T. Williams, Jr., was a lawyer. Shange grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where she began her education at Clark Elementary School. She went on to attend Dewey Elementary School, where she was one of a few African American students in the gifted program. At home, Shange was often surrounded by famous African American musicians and scholars, who were friends of her parents. Their guests included W.E.B. Du Bois, Miles Davis and Paul Robeson. Her family belonged to a Presbyterian church, as her mother was a follower of Reverend Edler G. Hawkins. At this point in the interview, Shange describes her early exposure to literature and film, and its influence upon her later work. She wrote her first poem at Trenton Central High School in Trenton, New Jersey.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:20 ?

Ntozake Shange moved with her family to Trenton, New Jersey at thirteen years old. She attended the racially divided Trenton Central High School, where she and her African American peers were physically attacked by the white students. During this time, Shange attended the March on Washington and several sit-ins with her parents. After graduating in 1966, she moved to New York City to attend Barnard College. While there, she frequented the Apollo Theater and other venues in Harlem, and attended the lectures and speeches of black nationalists. At Barnard College, Shange was one of several black students who founded the Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters to advocate for a black studies program. With her classmate, Thulani Davis, Shange also edited the Phat Mama: Her Black Mind literary magazine, which was a collection of student poetry, drawings and music. At nineteen years old, Shange nearly died from an illegal abortion and annulled an abusive marriage, which contributed to her depression.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_001\_004, TRT: 4:31:22 ?

Ntozake Shange attended Barnard College in New York City, where she cofounded the Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters. After graduating in 1970, she accepted a fellowship to pursue a Ph.D. degree in American studies at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, California. She later transferred to Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts to continue her studies. While there, Shange was sexually harassed by a professor. She decided to leave school, and briefly served as a social worker in New York City before moving to San Francisco, California. There, she pursued her interests in poetry and dance at Lone Mountain College. In 1973, Shange began writing the short stories and poetry that developed into the choreopoem 'For Colored Girls.' Along with choreographer Paula Moss and a cast of performers, Shange began performing 'For Colored Girls' at small venues throughout San Francisco. Due to the show's success, Shange brought the production to the Henry Street Settlement in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_002\_005, TRT: 5:30:36 ?

Ntozake Shange's first choreopoem, 'For Colored Girls,' was performed at the Henry Street Settlement and the Public Theater in New York City. In 1976, the production was mounted on Broadway at the Booth Theatre. Although the show received numerous recognitions, including an OBIE Award and Tony Award, many African American male critics gave the show negative reviews for its portrayal of black men. The show's poems were published as a book in 1977, and were adapted into several television productions and a film by Tyler Perry in 2010. During this time, Shange continued to write and collaborate with poets like Thulani Davis and Jessica Hagedorn, as well as musicians. Shange was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at thirty years old, and suffered a series of strokes in the early 2000s that temporarily disabled her. She struggled to overcome her bipolar disorder, and had to relearn to write following the strokes. At this point, Shange talks about her writing process and how she finds inspiration for her works.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_002\_006, TRT: 6:28:14 ?

Ntozake Shange wrote a number of plays, television productions and novels after the success of her first choreopoem, 'For Colored Girls.' Her theatrical works included an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's 'Mother Courage and Her Children' and her original piece 'Whitewash,' which was nominated for a CableACE Award in 1995. Published in 1982, Shange's novel about three daughters growing up in South Carolina, 'Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo,' was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Her next novel, 'Betsey Brown,' was inspired by her childhood and follows a young woman in the 1950s. At the time of the interview, Shange's most recent novel was 'Some Sing, Some Cry,' which was written with her sister, Ifa Bayeza, and chronicled black women's role in music through the generations of one family. Shange also wrote several children's books, including 'Coretta Scott' and 'Daddy Says.' She talks about her reviews from literary critics like C.L.R. James, as well as her writing techniques and inspiration.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_002\_007, TRT: 7:26:47 ?

Ntozake Shange taught courses on African American literature at several universities in California, including Sonoma State College and the University of California, Berkeley. In her syllabus, Shange focused on the writings of African American women like Alice Childress, Louise Meriwether and Zora Neale Hurston. She also taught a class on Aztec and Mexican love poetry. At this point, Shange shares her advice to black women and aspiring poets, and

describes her concerns about the lack of opportunities for young writers. She also talks about her favorite classical and contemporary poets, and reflects upon her own body of work. Shange describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and for women in poverty throughout the world. She also talks about the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and reflects upon the contributions of African Americans to art and science.

Video Oral History Interview with Ntozake Shange, Section A2016\_042\_002\_008, TRT: 8:16:56 ?

Ntozake Shange recites the poems 'Ode to Orlando,' 'An Actual Poem' and 'Loosening Strings or Give Me An "A",' which were all published in the collection 'Wild Beauty' in 2017. These poems were performed by Shange and her band of musicians, including Michael Raye, Chrissy Raye and Spaceman Patterson. Shange had one daughter, Savannah Shange-Binion, who earned a Ph.D. degree in American studies and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Shange talks about her plans for the future, and concludes the interview by reflecting upon her legacy.