AS: I'm Allison Seyler here on Tuesday, April 4, 2023, and I'm sitting down to interview Dr. Frances Ferguson. We're going to be talking as part of the Hopkins Retrospective Oral History Interviews. So, I'll start just kind of with an easy question for you. I wanted to begin by asking a little bit more about you and when and where you were born to situate the beginning of our interview.

FF: I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1947. My father was teaching summer school at Tulane, and my parents took me to Jackson, Mississippi almost immediately after I was born because my father was teaching at Millsaps College in Jackson, something he did for many years. He and my mother were incredibly impressive people, I think. They were white Southerners who had become very committed to civil rights, and my father was, in addition to teaching full-time at Millsaps, teaching part of the time simply on a volunteer basis at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college. He and another close friend of his in the History Department at Millsaps taught at Tougaloo from time to time.

Part of what was unusual about my sister's and my childhood is that we spent a good deal of time at Tougaloo, and were constantly in the company of a close friend of our family, a man named Ernst Borinski. He's someone who's been profiled in various exhibitions called From Swastika to Jim Crow that focused on people who fled the Holocaust and came to the US, got American credentials and decided that the place they needed to teach was an historically Black college.

AS: That's really neat. I think that exposure is pretty incredible at a young age. Are there other things that you would like to share about your parents or your siblings? I know you mentioned you had sisters. Were there memorable things you wanted to touch upon?

FF: I'm thinking more about my past these days because I'm retiring. Looking back, I’m struck by how much my parents were marked by having been very poor when they were growing up. They were
very much Depression kids. My father was so poor that there was a point in his life when he had only one shirt to wear. He had to wash out his shirt every night before he went to school the next day. My mother had lost her father when she was five and had been raised by a mother who had four children to deal with; she then died of breast cancer when my mother was in high school. Both my parents had a real commitment to education. Reading was sustaining for both of them from a young age because it was something you didn't need a lot of money for. They became committed readers and learners when they were very young.

AS: That's really neat. So, could you describe a little bit more about your childhood and maybe your own education? What was that like and kind of maybe what did you do for fun?

FF: Well, it's hard for me to remember any of the part of my life in Mississippi as much fun because I went to a public school which was segregated. There were terrible moments.

There were white teachers who would tell their all-white classes of students that they would meet “them” at the door with weapons if “they” tried to come to “our” school. And students were often not much better. There was a time when the body of a Black man named Mack Charles Parker was thrown into a river near Jackson that’s called the Pearl River after he was lynched. Shortly after news of the lynching was reported, a kid in my class sent me a note saying, “Have you read the latest bestseller?” I said “no,” in the way you do when you hear a question that sets itself up as a joke. The answer came back, “Skin Diving on the Pearl by M.C. Parker.” That’s just one small example of some of the sickening things that were part of daily life in school there. Various strands of my experience came together when Life magazine published a photo on its cover of a Woolworth’s lunch-counter sit-in in Jackson. I recognized at least one of the people sitting in as a friend of my parents. And in the crowd of people who were beating on the protesters and opening the lunch-counter salt shakers to empty them into the protesters’ cuts, I saw a kid who had been in classes with me in junior high. My family had just moved to North Carolina when that photo was published, and I was relieved not to have to be in classes any more with a kid like the one I recognized.
When we left Mississippi and moved to North Carolina, I felt a sense of exhilaration that it wasn’t Mississippi, and I imagined that it was even more of an improvement than it actually was.

*AS:* Yeah, I think the staggering difference is interesting from Mississippi to North Carolina because you're still then in the South, so I wonder what that transition was like, if you want to talk about that.

*FF:* When I arrived in North Carolina, the state had a reputation for being very progressive. At the time it was thought of as the most progressive part of the South, and it was funding education very effectively and integrating schools rather than opening the kind of all-white academies that the White Citizens’ Council launched as a response to the integration of the public schools in Mississippi. North Carolina then actively supported its universities and had one of the most important university systems in the county. In addition, a progressive governor named Terry Sanford, who later became president of Duke, started programs like the “Governor’s School.” It was a summer program for high school kids interested in the performing arts or academic subjects. Something like 300 kids were brought from all parts of the state to the campus of Salem College, a small college, in Winston Salem, North Carolina in a Moravian community that dated back to the eighteenth century. The idea was to provide an entirely free program that would find and support talent in all forms.

I was able to attend the Governor’s School one summer, and was grateful to the state of North Carolina that would put all of these kids together for what amounted to an artistic and intellectual summer camp. It was a wonderful thing to be able to participate in. By being themselves, my parents had provided me with interesting and thought-provoking experiences, but my sister and I in Mississippi were mainly observers of our parents and our parents’ friends. I think we felt much more independence when we moved to North Carolina and a less fraught world.

[0:10:00]

*AS:* Yeah. I know that you went to Wellesley for your Bachelor’s degree, and I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit and maybe then your sort of journey to Yale for graduate school, and this is definitely taking place, I guess, in the ‘60s and ‘70s, so it's kind of a unique time, especially when it comes to coeducation. So, I wonder if you could just speak about those experiences.
Yes. I was in the class of 1969 at Wellesley, so I was in Hillary Clinton’s class. It was the last class that graduated from women's colleges before undergraduate admissions at Yale and various other formerly all-male schools were open to women. If there had been more opportunities at competitive co-educational schools, many of us probably would have gone elsewhere. I wouldn’t have known to declare myself as a feminist at the age of 17 when I was applying for college, but going to Wellesley made me a feminist. I got an extraordinary education at Wellesley there—though I didn’t appreciate how extraordinary until I started graduate school. Although I was as anxious and insecure as any first-year graduate student, I started realizing by the end of the year that I had been well prepared to do the work.

I started at Yale in the fall of 1969 after finishing at Wellesley in the spring of 1969. In my first year of graduate school, I saw what difficulties Yale had in figuring out how to deal with women students. Although Yale had admitted women graduate students for decades, a number of male faculty who were unhappy that Yale had admitted undergraduate women acted out. They couldn’t distinguish graduate students from undergraduates and were unsupportive or unpleasant or both to graduate women as well as undergraduates.

But the situation brought out real generosity in some faculty. There was a very funny moment when the Joyce scholar, Richard Ellmann, nominated me for a residential fellowship in one of the Yale colleges. He hadn’t told me because he had been expecting that the dean and the master of the college would contact me themselves. When I happened to run into him one day, he asked how things had turned out with the fellowship, and he and I were both surprised. I had no idea what he was talking about. He was puzzled that I hadn’t been contacted by the college. In the event, he insisted that I be interviewed. Although I wasn’t really interested in the fellowship, [laughs] it seemed important to do the interview. Finally, I was told, “We would have been happy to give you the position, but you would have had to share a bathroom with male undergraduates and that would have been traumatic for them.” [Laughs] You really saw the limits of imagination that people had. Women in the Law School at Yale were better organized than most of the other women on campus. They insisted on essentially liberating the bathrooms and set up systems for having changeable signs on the bathroom doors so that a men’s room could quickly, by flipping the sign, become a women’s room and then be changed back again as needed. They recognized that making bathrooms the exclusive property of the male students and faculty really
compromised women’s access to classrooms and the library. And they protested the fact that some New York law firms held interviews for prospective associates in a club that didn’t allow women. Those law firms were essentially getting the club to screen out any women candidates the firms had happened to schedule for interviews.

[0:15:00]

AS: So, when you were at Yale, what were you focusing on for your master's program – or your Ph.D. program? What was the focus?

FF: I was interested in British Romanticism and particularly Romantic poetry and even more particularly Wordsworth’s poetry. To a lesser extent I was interested in the eighteenth century, chiefly Rousseau and Kant. But as I look at my career, I realize that I’ve gradually shifted the focus of my writing from British Romanticism to the eighteenth century.

There were a number of people I worked with at Yale who were extraordinary. Though Yale’s English department became quite divided later on, at the time I was there it was possible to study with people who later wouldn’t get on so well with one another. W.K. Wimsatt, a very famous 18th century scholar and literary theorist, was highly skeptical of a group of younger Romantics scholars like Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man in English and Comparative Literature. I was very fortunate to be able to learn from all of them—and to learn things that they couldn’t always learn from each other.

And there were a number of people—for example, Charles Feidelson, who wrote on American literature and on international modernism, and Martin Price, who worked both on the eighteenth century and the novel more generally—who were compelling teachers. Some of them also were models of intellectual integrity. At one point I learned that after Feidelson had published his very important and brilliant book Symbolism and American Literature, he decided to write a book on Henry James, a book that would focus on the prefaces James added when he included novels, he had written earlier in the New York Edition. When he was launched on the project, he received a request to review a manuscript, which turned out to be a manuscript focused on James’s prefaces to the New York Edition. Feidelson didn’t describe himself as having done anything remarkable, but I’ve always thought that his behavior qualified as an academic profile
in courage. He could have sunk the manuscript by writing a negative report and cleared the way for his own book. Instead, he wrote a very favorable review of the manuscript and was thus indirectly important in furthering the career of that other scholar, Laurence Holland, who was shortly afterward hired into the English Department of Johns Hopkins.

[0:20:00]

AS: Yeah, I think it speaks to the sort of ecosystem of academia too, that these different scholars can kind of play off each other’s work or be inspired by one another. Are there other things that you want to share about your career as a student, sort of things that you were inspired to investigate or maybe moments that called you I think to maybe being a professor or something that kind of spoke to you in terms of that being what you wanted to do?

FF: Well, I guess that I started thinking when I was in college that I really wanted to become an academic. I had gone to college thinking that I would major in sociology, partially because of the influence of Ernst Borinski whom I mentioned earlier. He was a sociologist, and I thought of him as an admirable model for anything and everything. But once I got to Wellesley, I took courses with some extraordinary people who were teaching English literature, and my experience of studying with them prompted me to head in that direction.

One thing that strikes me now as very strange is the pace we worked at when I was in graduate school. We worked at breakneck speed. We were told before we started that Yale had just implemented a new plan for the Ph.D. and wanted all of us to complete our Ph.D. in three years. There wasn't a single one in my class who managed that pace, but there were several of us who completed in four, and now that seems very fast. We were encouraged to take our oral exams in the spring of our second year of graduate school when we were still in coursework. We had to juggle our regular writing assignments for courses and reschedule some commitments so that they wouldn’t come due in the week we were taking our orals. A committee at Yale had recommended this fast pace because they had projected that there would be a crying need for more PhDs to replace people who had joined faculties right after World War II and were retiring. That quickly proved wrong. The job market went bad just at the time it had been projected to be robust. Since that time, it’s sometimes been better, sometimes worse, but never good.
My cohort and I were naïve about the whole job application process, it seems to me. The mechanism for publicizing job openings hadn’t really developed by the time I applied for jobs in the fall of 1972. That year was the first time that the Modern Language Association published its Job Information List, and it was not nearly as comprehensive as it later became. My friends and I were so unsure that schools were actually posting open positions on the Job Information List that we would send off letters of application almost randomly.

I got two different letters from Johns Hopkins, which, as I recall, had advertised two jobs. One letter said, “Sorry, we have nothing for you,” and the other one said, “I've been trying to reach you to schedule a campus visit.” [Laughs] It was clear that they weren’t really taking the screening process quite as seriously as people later did, and I suspect that my candidacy was helped by the fact that Paul de Man had written a recommendation for me. He had been at Hopkins briefly and was highly regarded there.

So, following up on that, just if you want to talk a little bit more, I know we had talked initially about a lot that happened to you while you were at Hopkins and things that you helped create, like the Baltimore Scholars Program and sort of just –

Oh, I didn't create the Baltimore Scholars Program. But I thought it was an admirable program and was glad to teach several students who came to Hopkins through the program.

Oh, okay, I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood. Maybe you were there when it was launched, I think, or at the beginning of it?

Mm-hmm.

I think this was around 1973. So, what was Hopkins like when you got here and started teaching?

Well, there were tiny numbers of women students and tiny numbers of women faculty. There were 12 women at all academic ranks out of a faculty of, I think, 300 at the time. And I was the first woman the Hopkins English Department had ever interviewed, much less hired. When I taught my first courses, there was one seminar in which I think probably half of the women undergraduates were enrolled. My guess is that they gravitated to the course partially because they were interested in the topic but
also because they liked the idea of being able to take a class with a female faculty member.

It must have been disruptive for the department to hire a woman. When the department faculty had been composed entirely of men, they were said to have been a tight-knit group. Legend had it that they had had lunch together, most of them, every weekday. I don’t know if you know about the history of the Faculty Club, but the Faculty Club used to have a main dining room and then what was called the Women’s Dining Room. Women were not allowed in the main dining room until just before I arrived at Hopkins. There were said to have been some male professors, including one famous scholar from the French Department, who regularly dined with a female colleague in the Women’s Dining Room. But until departments included women in their ranks, there weren’t many occasions for most of the faculty to darken its door.

Looking back, I find it almost hard to believe that there were as many small obstacles thrown in the path of women as there were. Without being entirely aware of it, I realize that I drew on my experience of Wellesley, which prompted a sense of commitment to one’s work. I don’t think that I was given a particularly hard time at the beginning of my career, but I don’t think I was given a particularly easy time either.

[0:30:00]

When I look back on my teaching schedule when I first arrived, I now find it unimaginable that I survived. [Laughs] I hadn’t finished my dissertation when I started, and I came down with a terrible sinus infection in August before classes were going to start. When I told the department chair that I wasn’t sure I would be able to submit my dissertation by the October 15th filing deadline, he fixed me with a stern gaze and said, “What would it be like if you put a real push on?” [Laughs] I knew then that I had no alternative to finishing and filing by the deadline.

When I was completing my dissertation, I was teaching a lecture course that had something like 100 students in it. In addition to lecturing, I was working with and observing the five graduate students who were teaching sections in the course. I was struggling to teach a lecture and a seminar that were entirely new courses for me. [Laughs] Ever since that October 15th deadline came and went without disaster; life has seemed good.
AS: [Both laugh] Yeah, I think sometimes we have to thank our past selves for taking care of us in those moments. Was there anybody – I think we had talked briefly about some of the professors that were here when you came – was there anybody that kind of helped with that transition for you to teaching at Hopkins?

FF: I don't know if I talked to you about Earl Wasserman, but –

AS: I think we might have mentioned it, so I want to make sure we share his story too.

FF: He died before I arrived. He died the spring before I arrived, but he was the primary reason I decided I wanted to take the job at Hopkins rather than another one. What I found amazing about him was that when I went from office to office, having one-on-one interviews with various faculty members in the department, he had a real conversation with me about serious intellectual matters. At one point, and I may have told you this, he said “Condorcet” when he meant “Condillac” and I blurted out, “Oh, Condillac.” He promptly corrected himself and said, “Yes, you're totally right. That's what I meant.”

I realized immediately after having said “Condillac” that I had violated the rules of being an interviewee, [laughs] For an interview you’re supposed to accept what your interlocutor says without demurring. But he was the kind of person who made you realize that he cared about ideas and not about insisting on his own infallibility. His behavior gave me a strong sense of something I've always valued about Hopkins, which is that in my experience of it, it's a place where people have incredibly serious intellectual discussions and develop some of their strongest friendships from reading and discussing pre-circulated papers. It’s a great thing about Hopkins. And it’s that aspect of Hopkins that made me so, so unhappy when there was a moment when the Dean decided that every department in the university would have a self-study, a white paper, a discussion of the state of the field, and an external review.

[0:35:00]

For more than a year, since every department was being reviewed in these public events, you lost the time for the usual discussions in seminars. You were either going to some event for your departmental self-scrutiny or the self-scrutiny of another department.
AS: No, that makes sense. I don’t know, just bringing all the things, and using one metric to measure very different departments that operate in different ways doesn’t make sense at a place like this.

FF: Basically, strategic planning was a distraction from the things that really animated people. And developing five-year plans for very small departments is a strange exercise. A plan stops making sense if one or two members of a small department leave.

AS: Sure. So I know you touched a little bit on the sort of culture of the English department, but I just wanted to bring that up a little bit to give you the opportunity to talk more about it, you know, what sort of pedagogical approaches y'all were taking at that time when you came to Hopkins or if there are things that you want to mention that the department did at that time that are particularly unique or were maybe more of the same that you had experienced in your grad school experience.

FF: It was fairly common all over the country for there to be historical surveys of English and American literature for undergraduates, and they were frequently done as some version of a lecture course. At Yale, a number of people teaching the lecture courses would teach sections and rotate into the lecturer spot and then out again. But at Hopkins, there was always one faculty member—usually a junior faculty member-- teaching a lecture course. I taught one lecture course each semester, and benefited tremendously from the pressure to lay out a body of material in an hour.

But I think that the thing that was most important about Hopkins’ understanding of graduate pedagogy in particular was the seminar-style culture of discussion. It was very formative for me, and it’s something that I think a lot of the students I worked with at Hopkins valued about the place. I’m struck by the fact that a number of people I taught at Hopkins have gone on to become highly influential scholars partially because they developed such an acute ear for other people’s ideas and arguments. Learning to listen to other people and accurately characterize their arguments was—and is--a highly developed skill at Hopkins.

AS: So, all good things maybe come to a pause or an end, and I think that you sort of transitioned around 1977 to UC Berkeley, and so I wanted to see if you could talk about your role there and sort of maybe that transition from Hopkins to Berkeley, because I'm sure that that was a bit different.
Yeah. I liked Hopkins so much that I was keen to stay. But though the Dean offered me a raise and some research leave, there was no way I could turn down Berkeley’s offer of tenure.

On the one hand, I really loved Berkeley. On the other hand, I recognized that there were ways in which it was a mixed bag to be a tenured woman at the time. I was glad that I wasn’t alone. There were more women in the Berkeley English Department than I ever could have expected at Hopkins. There were three tenured women in the English Department. Another woman, Josephine Miles, had just retired as a distinguished professor, and there were a number of untenured women coming up. But because there were relatively few tenured women in the university, women faculty received unusually high numbers of assignments to serve on ad hoc committees and the like. It was wearing at moments.

But Berkeley at the time was incredibly interesting. There were, I think, four of us hired into the Berkeley English Department in the same year, and we were all very much of an age. A couple of years after I got there, a group of people working with Svetlana Alpers and Stephen Greenblatt founded a journal called Representations. Being a co-editor on the journal involved meeting every other week over brown-bag lunches to discuss recent submissions, and the co-editors, from a range of departments including History, Art History, and English, became a very active intellectual community in a place that can sometimes seem like a place where there is a lot of parallel play and little community.

So, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit more about the Representations – I guess it's a journal – and your editorial work with that, because I know that is another component of sort of your career overall, is this editorial work. So, what was Representations?

Representations is the journal that began as something of a flagship for “new historicism.” Joel Fineman, another co-editor on the board, described New Historicism as the “history of the anecdote” in a very witty and shrewd observation. Representations-style essays tended not to talk about major events or thick context but to notice apparently small but resonant incidents or episodes and tease out their importance. The quintessential Representations essay tried to uncover the literary aspects of history and the the historical aspects of literature. I have to say I’m not a classical new historicist by any means, but it was very useful for my work to be reading a lot of work that was in that vein, and being on the board
and talking with the people who were part of it helped me clarify some of my own views.

And from that time on, I’ve found editorial work to be intellectually very important to me. When I went back to Hopkins, I was for a time senior editor of *ELH*, which had begun life as *English Literary History*. In Chicago, I’ve been a co-editor of *Critical Inquiry* and have really benefitted from the intellectual camaraderie of that.

[0:45:00]

**AS:** Great. So, I guess we could pause and maybe – if there's any other things that you wanted to share, you know, about Berkeley, but I do want to shift back to talking about your return to Hopkins, but I think we covered Berkeley alright, or if there's anything else you want to add.

**FF:** Yeah, that's fine.

**AS:** Yeah. I think 10 or 11 years is a long time to be in a place, but I think the differences between Berkeley and Hopkins are clear to me. So, you came then back in the ‘80s to Hopkins?

**FF:** ‘88.

**AS:** When you came back, were there things that you noticed that were different about the school, the department? And obviously, you did continue your editorial work here, so that’s another point you could elaborate on if you wanted to. But I'm really curious in that 10 years’ time if there were huge differences that you saw.

**FF:** Well, Hopkins was already starting to recognize that it was going to be financially impossible to continue in the mode in which the university had begun. Hopkins, like the University of Chicago, once had something like twice as many graduate students as undergraduates. In the period in which there were National Defense Education Act fellowships and student loans available, universities could relatively easily find support for graduate education from outside sources. In addition, there were foundations providing Danforth and Kent four-year fellowships and Woodrow Wilson one-year fellowships. But once the National Defense and the Danforth funding disappeared, and once it became clear that the market for PhDs was not as robust as it was once predicted to be, graduate-intensive universities all over the country started realizing that they needed to change. By the time I returned to
Hopkins in ‘88, it had more undergraduates than it had had before and fewer graduate students.

When I arrived at Hopkins in the Fall of ‘73, it had bright undergraduate students who were serious about their studies. But Hopkins did not make particularly strenuous efforts to publicize itself. For years, until around the time I returned in ‘88, Hopkins was so confident of being able to assemble a very substantial cohort of talented undergraduates from an area between Virginia and New Jersey that it was not doing a lot of really active recruiting. When I was at Hopkins in the ‘70’s, the undergraduate college attracted a number of students who hoped that it would be a feeder for the medical school, so there were tons of undergraduates who were pre-med. In recent years the pre-med group and biomechanical engineering have continued to be important, but the university has also attracted large numbers of students who major in political science and international relations and the Writing Seminars.

AS: I’m curious too about a student body. So obviously there's probably going to be more women in the”80s when you get here, but there's also a transition I think actually in the late ‘50s but early ‘60s is when most of them are graduating to admit more Black students. So, I wonder if you could just talk briefly about your experience with whether or not the student body had changed to be more integrated at that point.

FF: Yes, and the English Department was definitely recruiting Black scholars. After I went back to Hopkins, one of the people whom I liked a lot was a younger colleague, Robert Reid-Pharr, who’s now at Harvard. I think that his situation was much more complicated than the situation I had had at Berkeley. I was one of a relatively small number of women at Berkeley but I wasn’t tasked with doing nearly so much as Robert did to run searches to hire more faculty working in African American or African diaspora studies.

AS: Yeah, and I think it’s not until 2003 when the Center for Africana Studies is established, so it did take a bit of time for Hopkins to really make good progress in those areas. So, while you were at Hopkins, I think in the 2000s you were awarded the Mary Elizabeth Garrett Professorship in Arts and Sciences, and you taught as a professor of English in the Humanities. So, what kind of made those roles unique or special, and were there any added requirements or things that you benefitted from having those roles?
**FF:** With the Mary Elizabeth Garrett Professorship, what I got was the title, but I valued it greatly because I so much admired Mary Elizabeth Garrett’s work in having organized the group of women who founded the medical school and insisted that women be admitted on an equal footing with men. It took decades before the medical school actually did achieve gender parity, which it did sometime just after the turn of the century, I think. Mary Elizabeth Garrett’s work was ultimately very successful.

**AS:** Yeah, I think she’s somebody that needs a little bit more credit around here. So, the English Department obviously evolved a bit. One of the other things that just popped into my mind that I was curious about was there’s also the Caroline Donovan professorship that the English Department gives out. Do you remember your experiences with that in terms of – I guess it’s something that's selected by the department or is more of an honorary thing coming from the provost. Do you know about that professorship?

[0:55:00]

**FF:** I think it is usually from the dean.

**AS:** Okay. Obviously chairing the department is a big responsibility, and I think that that's something that came for you both at Hopkins and then also at Chicago once you moved there. Could you talk a little bit about what that experience was like at Hopkins? And we can also talk about Chicago now if you’d like to.

**FF:** Well, at Hopkins, my time as chair was somewhat complicated because I was chair immediately after my husband, as he and I were splitting up. We had an especially complicated break because we had been members of the same department for years. I was hired at Hopkins in 1973, he was hired in 1974, and we got married in the fall of 1975. When we split up, he then went to the University of Illinois in Chicago, and I stayed at Hopkins. There was a strange little notice about our breakup in the Chronicle of Higher Education, of all things, and I found myself in the position of thinking that one of the things that's useful about being chair is that it gave me an opening write to my colleagues to say, “This is just a memo to let you know that I know that you know that [laughs] the Chronicle of Higher Education has published this item.”

It made life easier to have a position in which I could say, “I know my situation creates awkwardness for you, but let’s all get back to work.” At Chicago, I had a more wrenching time as chair when
one of my junior colleagues was initially turned back for tenure. I thought that the decision was a very poor one and contested it vehemently, even to the point of telling the provost that I was going to resign if the decision was allowed to stand. I don't really approve of people making such threats, but I felt that I couldn't square this decision with my understanding of what seemed intellectually just in this particular case. And I was proud to be able to confer with the entire tenured staff of the department and see how firmly they shared my assessment of the case.

I think that the experience of wrestling with various upper administrators over that case made me appreciate how well my department at UChicago worked together virtually all the time. It's an impressive thing to see people evaluating their colleagues seriously and without getting involved in extraneous battles. The English Department at UChicago has been exemplary in that way in the time I've been here.

AS: Yeah, it seems like it's a lot of responsibility, but if there’s good energy and sort of support from your colleagues it probably makes it a lot easier of a task to take on.

[1:00:00]

FF: Yeah. We were able to do a lot of hiring when I was chair, and we were very fortunate in being able to hire the people we did. It’s always thrilling to succeed in convincing people to pick up and change their lives. [Laughs]

AS: I guess just to get a picture of maybe the number of professors in the department when you started in the ‘70s versus maybe when you left Hopkins later on, could you describe the size of the department at all?

FF: The Hopkins department has always been an unusually small department. I think it may now have as many as 14 people--that's a guess. However, many it has now, I don’t think it ever had more than twelve in the time I was there. At one moment when Amanda Anderson was chairing there were five of us. I'll never forget her looking at me and saying, “My god, we're a department of five,” and I just replied, “Even when I was at Berkeley and there were 84.5 full-time faculty positions, there were basically five people in the department who did the bulk of the work of the department.” Not in terms of scholarship, but in terms of keeping the committees and admissions and all of that going. Even when the department was temporarily very small, it quickly did good hiring and put the
department at full strength again. It’s a department that has always been known for its intellectual seriousness, and that reputation has always proved useful in attracting excellent scholars.

AS: Thanks, that’s helpful to think about the size of the departments. So, one of the other sort of curious things for me on your resume is your service as the codirector of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute. So, I wanted to ask you about that experience and what you think the benefits of a program like that are.

FF: I don’t even know if the NEH is running the summer programs that it used to. They used to have summer seminars taught by one person who might invite one or two guest speakers, and summer institutes that were characteristically co-directed, sometimes by people from different institutions and sometimes by people from the same institution. When I decided I wanted to do an institute on the topic essentially of 18th century aesthetics, I asked Ronald Paulson if he wanted to direct it with me. The institute brought in people who were teaching at various different institutions around the country for something like six weeks of meetings. I think that that’s the only time I’ve done that kind of collaborative teaching in a summer program. When I’ve done other teaching that wasn’t at my home institution, it’s been a matter of my simply being a short-term visitor at the University of Zurich or Princeton—or the School of Criticism and Theory.

AS: Yeah, I’ll have to check out the NEH’s institutes, because I know they’re still doing some programming, but I’m not sure it’s that specific. What has your experience been like at the University of Chicago and when did you go there? I know you were the chair of the English Department, so could you tell me about that experience? I’d love to hear more.

[1:05:00]

FF: Well, I went to UChicago in 2004-5 and really didn’t manage to settle in. I was constantly looking for an apartment to buy and I struggled to identify a doctor, a dentist, and a hairdresser who would be mine. So, I went back to Hopkins in 2005 after spending just one year at UChicago. And when UChicago made an offer to me in 2012, I was dumbfounded because I had feared that they would never talk to me again.

UChicago has actually put me through their vetting process three different times. They made an offer to me in something like 2001
that I ended up not accepting; then they considered my case in 2004; and finally, they considered my case in 2012. I feel as though they’ve been very indulgent with me. [laughs] And I’m grateful for that. My time at UChicago has been a very happy part of my career, and I say that not to disparage Berkeley or Hopkins at all. It’s just that in the last decade, I’ve felt as though I’ve had especially productive relationships with colleagues and students.

AS: Yeah, I would assume I guess the provost or someone, maybe the dean, is the one that was doing the recruiting for you to try to get you to come to Chicago or was there someone in particular that reached out?

FF: There were people in the English Department who reached out to me after an accidental encounter I had in, I think, either 2011 or early in 2012. A former UChicago colleague from another department invited me to have breakfast with him the morning after he gave a talk at Hopkins, and he broached the question of my returning to UChicago. At that point he put the bee in the bonnet of English Department colleagues.

AS: Thanks. I want to just step back a little bit to your time at Hopkins because I realize I didn’t ask explicitly about it, but I know that you served on some really important search committees at Hopkins, including that of President Bill Brody, so I wonder if you could talk about your experience with helping shape the university through leadership positions, through helping decide on leadership positions.

FF: Yeah. I think that one thing that I really valued about my time at Hopkins was that I did have the chance to serve on some relatively small, and therefore nimble search committees. They worked very efficiently and effectively because they were small enough to have everyone in on crucial meetings and interviews. We had a considerable degree of consensus and conviction about our recommendations in most of the committees I served on.

[1:10:00]

There were times when people would say completely disarming things in an interview that would make you realize that they were right for the job. So, I vividly remember Bill Brody’s interview in which someone said to him something like “And why do you think you’re the right person for this job?” It was a relatively standard question for one of these interviews, and most people answered in relatively canned ways. Brody, however, very calmly said, “Well,
someone has to do these jobs.” His comment showed great insight on his part; it registered that he knew that the job was going to be tough and that he would need to go into prepared to think that it would be a serious job that was especially serious because of the unexpected challenges that would arise and the potential consequences of his decisions.

AS: It's interesting to hear you say that because as an archivist and learning about Brody’s sort of experience and legacy here, he does seem like honestly one of the more approachable presidents that the university has had, sort of a little bit more on the ground with the students, willing to have tough conversations with them in person at a moment's notice.

FF: But I should say that I’m not sure that all faculty had the same sense of things that I did and that the students did. But I do remember vividly that I was very impressed that he showed up—and on roller skates—on move-in day for freshman and similar occasions. It was a lovely thing on his part. He was a very hard-working guy, and he also talked in impressive ways about what it had been like to found a company that was manufacturing the MRIs that he had designed. He said in a moment that I thought was completely convincing, “You know, it’s nerve-racking to sweat the next payday and wonder if you're going to be able to pay everyone the way you’ve promised to.”

AS: Yeah, just a real human. [Laughs] A little less robotic than some leaders and just in general of the world. [Both laugh]

FF: Yeah.

AS: So, I'm really excited about all of the things that you’ve shared, but I also want to sort of give you a moment to think about the challenges that you've faced in your career. Obviously, you know, we've talked a little bit about them sort of being a woman in a completely male-dominated department, but there's probably also other challenges that you faced administratively or with your students, so I wonder if you would want to speak about those.

FF: Well, I think I’ve kind of touched on the challenging moments. You know, it was challenging to be a member of a couple in a very small department and splitting up, and it was really a challenge to come to terms with the fact that I had to make a decision about whether to simply accept the judgment of the dean who had blocked the promotion of my younger colleague. You know, those aren’t particularly unusual sorts of challenges, other people have
them too. But as I look back on my career, I feel almost guilty that I haven't had more challenges than I have.

[1:15:00]

I’ve been remarkably fortunate. I was lucky to have applied for my first job at a moment when some departments were starting to feel a little pressure to hire women. And it’s been fortune upon fortune to have spent my career at three very great universities where I’ve been able to learn so much.

AS:

I also wanted to ask you about teaching, if you want to reflect on that. I know we had previously spoken and you had shared a little bit about some current – I mean, you literally just stopped teaching a few weeks ago, so I know you had shared a little bit with me about some of the assignments and things that you have been doing with your more recent classes, and I just wanted to see if you wanted to share any sort of highlights of your teaching career in terms of reaching students, in terms of having those special moments with students because I know that is hugely impactful probably in this reflection and sort of gratitude that you have about your career.

FF:

I’m increasingly conscious of how important it is to someone who’s teaching to recognize that they’re constantly being taught. It may seem easy to talk with students through a class, but a huge part of teaching is attentive listening so that you can be attuned to what your students are saying to you and how your students are understanding you. So, I can’t even begin to imagine what it would be like to decide that you just wanted to opt out and have nothing but time for your research and not teach. I do feel a pang now that I’m retiring and won’t have students to talk with and the regular rhythms of the academic year to think about.

I don't know if I talked to you at all about a course I taught on congregational hymns, but I taught it once in the pandemic when we were all on Zoom, and realized that one thing that might work would be to have people doing paraphrases rather than anything that claimed to be a more sophisticated literary analysis. We started with the Book of Psalms, then worked with some of the hymns that are based on those Psalms, and ended up with some hymns of John Newton’s and William Cowper’s.

[1:20:00]
People in the class did an extraordinary job of really working with these psalms and hymns. They learned what these unfamiliar hymns were by working to paraphrase them, and then at the end of the course produced their own little collections in which they were selecting 10 items from all the things we had been reading over the course of the quarter. Usually, I have felt as though it was important to feature a substantial final paper for a graduate seminar in particular, but I was impressed by the work that people did that seemed more like preparation for writing a substantial paper. But I don't know if my paean to the students in that class meets your expectations for...[laughs]

AS: Yeah, absolutely. I was trying to remember. I think we had talked about reading Between the World and Me, and so obviously this class – I think that class is a huge example of the types of learning that students need to do to diversify their experience, but I think we had talked about you using that book in one of your classes maybe this past fall.

FF: Yeah. It was a book that I was asking students to read in a course on memoir. I think it’s a really interesting book in part because Coates captures what it’s like to be a teenager listening and listening and listening to songs, you’re hearing so that you can try to figure out what the lyrics are. You can just go to the internet and get the lyrics, but Coates makes it clear that there's something really important about that experience of training your attention so that you can figure out lyrics without looking for the key that the internet would provide.

AS: Yeah, I love the idea too of using more contemporary writers because I think that's something we miss out on in sort of the English that we get in high school. So that's a perfect moment for it to happen in college, yeah.

FF: And in the course on memoir, I started with Rousseau’s Confessions, and then went to John Stuart Mill's autobiography before moving into a whole range of things that are of very recent vintage: so, Mary Karr but also James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates. I think the Rousseau almost worked, the John Stuart Mill didn’t, and I was persuaded that I wouldn’t want to teach the Mill again if I were repeating the course.

As I've been packing up books, I’ve been reading or rereading various things to see if I think I have to hold onto a copy. I just read Robert Penn Warren’s All the Kings Men and Eudora Welty’s Delta Wedding, and thought it's unimaginable that you would teach
these. Even though there isn't a single racist word in Eudora Welty’s book, and even though the racist word in *All the Kings Men* is only part of a description of a shack, you realize that people would have a hard time getting with the world that's being presented in these novels.

[1:25:00]

I know that there are a lot of people who are indignant now when students say things like “I can’t believe you’re making us read Freud because he was homophobic.” In that sense, I understand people who see Wokeism everywhere and object to it. But I think that it’s good that all of us who teach are pressed into coming up with a good explanation for why we’re asking someone to read something. It’s not enough to say, “Such and such wasn’t meant unkindly when it was written” or “it’s a classic because it’s a classic.” That’s really not enough. You need to think about the importance of obsolescence even in literary things. One eighteenth-century writer I’m really interested in, Anna Letitia Barbauld, edited the essays of Joseph Addison, who was spoken of in the eighteenth century as the best possible model for style anyone could imagine. That view of Addison’s prose lasted for decades.

But when Anna Laetitia Barbauld is editing his work, she's saying, “You know, no one can really write like this anymore.” It's only a few decades later, but there has been a real transformation in the language and in what’s available for people to say. I think it was very insightful to have so vividly registered that point centuries ago.

*AS:* Thank you. I’d just like to ask this question for another moment of reflection sort of about the proudest moment of your career. Are there any moments that kind of stand out as that moment? And I'm hoping maybe folks at Chicago threw you a retirement party, if you want to talk about that at all or kind of saying goodbye to teaching.

*FF:* People at Chicago *did* throw a retirement event for me, and it was exactly what I would've hoped in my wildest dreams. The English Department chair and I decided that it would be simple and hybrid, so that some students from my time at Berkeley and Hopkins could attend virtually. Eight people who had been students when I was at Berkeley and Hopkins spoke, and two of my current colleagues. No one had more than five minutes. People were lovely and funny, and we wrapped things up in a hurry. I was immensely grateful.
AS: It seems appropriate to just acknowledge it in some way, you know, even if it’s not a big public showdown or something.

[Laughs]

FF: Well, I wanted to avoid an all-day conference, and I really, really wanted to avoid a situation in which someone thought they had to organize a Festschrift. Festschriften are not things that publishers want to deal with, and I wanted to spare the wonderful people who have worked with me the agony of spending time on something that took them away from their own work. My retirement event particularly pleased me because I felt that no one had to take time from more important things and kill themselves in the process.

[Laughs]

[1:30:00]

AS: [Laughs] So, I also really would love to know what's next for you, if you want to share kind of on a personal note hobbies or personal adventures sort of that you're looking forward to in your retirement.

FF: Well, I’m moving to New York where my son lives, so I look forward to that. I'm very much looking forward Gustavo Dudamel’s arrival at the New York Philharmonic. I’m going to be teaching at Princeton spring 2024, and in the meantime, I’ve got to write a talk for the retirement event of a colleague at Rutgers. I’ve got a few things still to wrap up, but I am mainly worrying about finding an apartment. At this moment, moving feels like an adventure laced with terror because I don't yet have an apartment lined up. [Laughs]

AS: Yeah, I think once that happens, everything else will fall into place around it and you'll be –

FF: I think so too, but until then I may wake up often in the middle of the night. [Laughs]

AS: Maybe have little night terrors for a little while, [laughs] but once you get it, it'll be okay. [Both laugh] I do always also like to ask at the end of these interviews if there’s anything else that, you know, you feel we’ve missed or you’d like to add to the discussion, things we didn't talk about that you want to elaborate on, so just open the floor for that.

FF: I guess there's only one thing. There was an interesting moment at Berkeley when I had a ridiculously swollen title, the “Faculty
Assistant to the Vice Chancellor for the Status of Women.” While I was in that job, a group of five of us started meeting every Wednesday morning at 8:00. We somehow commandeered a room that was pretty nondescript but had a mobile chalkboard. As we were kicking around various ideas, one or another of us would leap up and write out plans for a new academic program to be called Women’s Studies and that would maintain an important role for an existing Women’s Center. We were fortunate enough to persuade the provost to authorize a search across five different departments to hire the first tenured faculty member in Women’s Studies. I was able to chair a search committee that had representatives from Political Science, History, Economics, English and Sociology, and we ended up hiring the historian Mary Ryan, who later joined the Hopkins faculty. We developed so much support that the provost allowed us to hire two women faculty into Women’s Studies and Sociology. That outcome felt like a triumph, particularly because it all started with just the five of us. [Laughs] We were fanning out and impersonating multitudes.

**AS:** Yeah, I think that there was sort of a similar group, but maybe with a little less power at Hopkins. I guess the Women’s Faculty Forum? I'm not sure if you were active with that.

**[1:35:00]**

**FF:** I was active with Women, Gender, and Sexuality. I chaired that briefly and then co-chaired it with Veena Das and Michael Moon at Hopkins. I did run the search committee at Hopkins that hired Judith Walkowitz to run Women’s Studies at Hopkins. But there was a great tragedy for what became Women, Gender, and Sexuality, which was we failed to persuade the Hopkins History Department to offer a permanent appointment to the associate director of WGS. I tried everything I could think of to get the History Department to agree to give her a joint appointment, but the dean and the History Department couldn’t agree on making the appointment because History felt that her appointment might compromise their next hiring.

**AS:** Yeah, there’s always political undertones I think to a lot of what’s happening in higher ed.

**FF:** The position of the History Department was that they wanted a guarantee from the Dean that they wouldn’t lose a future line by endorsing this appointment. They wanted assurances that her appointment would be an add-on. I have to say that I did and do think that their position was completely insane. No department
ever is guaranteed a certain number of appointments for any length of time. Deans make such decisions with a short time horizon. Budgets change, and deans change. And when a new dean takes over, all the rules of engagement change.

**AS:** I did also realize that you and I had talked at length about the Baltimore Scholars Program, and I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit more before we end about that program, because I think one of the things, we briefly touched on was sort of Hopkins’ necessity or Hopkins’ sort of lack of recruitment in the local communities, but I think that was something that was brought about to remedy that.

**FF:** Now I can’t remember whether it was Matt Crenson or Steven David who was particularly important in launching that program.

**AS:** I think when we talked it was Matt, but I can double check my notes too.

**FF:** But I think it was a very good program, although I would have liked to have seen it shifted a bit and made a tribute to Thurgood Marshall. It was a very good thing that Hopkins registered the fact that it needed to develop such a program, and I think maybe Wes Moore might have gone to Hopkins as a Baltimore Scholar—though I’m not certain about that because I think that he didn’t always live in Baltimore. I think I told you I was on a mock interview committee that interviewed him before he did his I think Fulbright—not Fulbright—before he did one of his international fellowship interviews.

**AS:** So, with the Baltimore Scholars Program, it’s specifically set up to recruit students from city high schools? Is that correct?

[1:40:00]

**FF:** Uh-huh.

**AS:** Okay.

**FF:** And so, I think that it was particularly drawing on city college, but I actually knew a student and taught a student who was from the county. So, I think that it wasn’t just Baltimore City, it was also Baltimore County.

**AS:** Okay. I was going to look to see if I could figure out the scholarship program.
Wes Moore got a Rhodes.

Oh, it was a Rhodes, yep, that’s what it was. Okay. Awesome.

Yeah, I think one of my neighbors, their sons received the Baltimore Scholar scholarship to come here, so it’s really interesting how much of an impact that program has had.

Yeah, I think it’s been a very good thing. It’s partially been useful in trying to counteract the university’s association with Woodrow Wilson, who expressed openly racist and antisemitic views.

Yeah, and I think that's particularly interesting that the university is still using – the students don't call it the Wilson Fellow Program anymore, I don’t think – I think they have their own underground term for it, but the university is still using it. And even in light of Princeton, for example, removing it from their school, you know, I think it’s beyond time, you know?

I totally agree. I was struck by the fact that the president at Princeton said very openly that he regretted that he hadn’t changed the name of that center when the issue had come up some years earlier.

Yeah, and Hopkins now has a name review board where folks can submit names for potential removal or contextualization. So, I think we’re moving in the right direction with that, but that is one name that I think has a clear indication of no longer needing to – it doesn’t serve its purpose here anymore for sure.

And it’s good that a review board has been set up to consider these things. So, I congratulate all of you who are at the university doing that.

Yeah, it’s going to be our adventure for sure. We’re reviewing three names right now, so the committee is hard at work.

Great.

Well, those are all of the questions that I have for you. This has just been absolutely wonderful. I really appreciate your time. I’m just going to go ahead and stop the recording.

Okay.

All right.