

Transcript – Johanna Fernandez, Class of 1993

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Interviewer: Judith Circus

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Track 1

Judith Circus: [00:00:00] Okay, I think we're on. So, it is January 10, 2017 at 4:30. This is Judith Circus, Brown class of 1992, and I am in New York interviewing Joanna Fernandez, Brown class of '93. You will tell me about why it should have been 1992, but why don't we start with some of your background and that can lead us to Brown. So, do you want to tell me a little bit about where you grew up, your family?

Joanna Fernandez: I grew up in the Bronx, New York in the 1980s. And I went to public schools all my life. My parents are [00:01:00] immigrants from the Dominican Republic. They arrived here in the late 1960s. In many ways, they were fleeing the crisis that detonated in the Dominican Republic when the United States intervened on the island, militarily, in 1965. The US pretty much decapitated the first democratically elected president on the island, in part because of his support of the Cuban Revolution, although he was not a socialist himself. There was a civil war in the Dominican Republic, and during that period the US government opened up visas and a migration program from the Dominican Republic to [00:02:00] New York, and that really is the beginning of the first massive migration of Dominicans to New York. My parents were not political, but they came here along with many others during that period.

They settled in the South Bronx. Later they moved to the Grand Concorde, which was known as the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue of the Bronx, and Puerto Rican migrants and African Americans were moving into the Bronx from East Harlem, Harlem, and Brooklyn, and taking over apartments that were left behind by white flight and white migration from New York City [00:03:00] to the outer boroughs. So, I grew up during the crack epidemic of that period, in pretty dilapidated schools and a dilapidated urban environment. My parents were very strict and protective. They

grew up under dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, so they brought with them to the United States a very straight and narrow, disciplinarian approach to child-rearing.

I went to high school in Manhattan. My first school was Murry Bergtraum for Business Careers. I had [00:04:00] ideas of going into business at some point in my life. I don't know what I was thinking, but I was a truant during those years, freshman and sophomore year, and my father found out about it. I don't know how I kept it from him for so long, and he yanked me out of that school and plopped me in Manhattan Center for Science and Math in East Harlem, where my brothers had attended. That move, to Manhattan Center for Science and Math, definitely changed the direction of my life.

JC: So, was the curriculum mostly focused on science and math, or –

JF: Yes, you know, there was an emphasis on science and math and I liked science and math. I remember I only went to classes I liked [00:05:00] at Murray Bergtraum, so I skipped all kinds of classes on key-punching, for example, and typing. But I maintained a decent grade point average in science, math, and English, which I enjoyed, literature. I have three brothers, two older and one younger, and when I got to Manhattan Center, I was admitted into a college readiness program at Columbia, the Double Discovery Program at Columbia, which is a product of the '60s [00:06:00] reform movements in the urban north, to get students of color into college. I took a calculus class, like a college level calculus class, at Columbia during that period. That was part of the program. I don't know if we want to go straight into this or if you want to know anything else about my childhood.

JC: Well, I guess part of what is interesting to me is the way in which, obviously, you're a historian now, informed by your experience as an activist and politically engaged. Clearly your account of that past is sort of informed by a sense of the broader political context. I guess what would be interesting is to hear about to what extent those politicized contexts were things that you were already conscious of at the time, or how those experiences [00:07:00] motivated or informed your subsequent politicization.

JF: Well, my parents grew up under a dictatorship, and previously I mentioned that they weren't political, but when you grow up under dictatorship, your life and the way you perceive the world, is very political, so my father and my mother were always talking about life under dictatorship, and that had a politicizing impact on me. My father was also orphaned at a very young age. He lost both his parents when he was seven or eight, and my father has a very strong moral core and center and a very strong sense of justice. He believes that no one should go hungry, in part because that was the life [00:08:00] that was dealt to him at a very young age, so he went hungry, he struggled for the better part of his life. So, listening to those stories of poverty in the Dominican Republic, I think, influenced my own interest and questions of inequality and social problems.

My parents also sent me to the Dominican Republic every summer, and that comparative experience of seeing poverty and political crisis in the Dominican Republic, and a different kind of poverty in New York, certainly led me to ask questions [00:09:00] about the different manifestations of social problems. It just offered a comparative perspective that sent me asking questions at a young age, which I didn't explore actively through reading. I was not a reader, at all, growing up. I think the first book I read, I read when I was fourteen or fifteen. I remember it was *Of Mice and Men*, and that had an impact on me, but I was interested in understanding the world, but there wasn't an avenue that was clear to me, through which I could do that. [00:10:00]

JC: Were there gender dynamics between your brothers and you? You said that your three brothers had gone to the science and tech high school, whereas you had at least started out at Murray Bergtraum, and then you were sent to follow your brothers. Was that in part also because similar trajectories were not imagined for you, or –

JF: No, my parents expected me to go to school and to do well in school. The difference, however, was that my siblings were allowed to play outside and I was confined to the apartment. They guarded very strictly my relationship with boys. In fact, [00:11:00] having a boyfriend was illegal in my household. They were cultural Catholics, and so they were guarding my sexuality. My budding sexuality. And I was very – I grew up with a very strong sense of that, of that difference, and I remember that in junior high school, I started wearing boy's shoes because I wanted to assert my power. I don't know that I was – I was doing these things, but I didn't have

a language or a narrative. I had heard the term feminism, but that was the extent of [00:12:00] the meaning of that term for me, and I knew it had something to do with women.

Because I grew up with three boys, I guess I must have perceived a difference in treatment because I wanted to assert my independence, control, and I did so by wearing boy's shoes at a very early age.

JC: Well, I mean, it's interesting, too, that you said that you were a truant and were surprised that your father didn't realize it for two years – which, given the fact that you were otherwise confined to the apartment, you had a certain freedom—which is a freedom that, having also grown up in New York, I know that that's why growing up in New York is amazing. Right? Because you have a certain kind of freedom from your family [00:13:00] that people who don't grow up in New York –

JF: Do not.

JC: Just, you don't have access to.

JF: Right. I think the issue of class and race are important here, because my parents – not just gender – my parents were concerned about the urban crisis, as they understood it. Crime, drug use, and the potential for me to become pregnant, right? The ways in which that would change my life. So, they had all kinds of concerns about the difficult urban environment into which they had brought their children, and so they policed my brothers. But not to the extent they policed me, [00:14:00] as a girl, as the only girl.

JC: And did they hope that being in the same high school as the brothers, they would kind of keep an eye on you?

JF: By that time, my brothers had graduated. But they knew the school and they figured that they needed to remove me from the environment I was in, which was leading to truancy. They knew some of the teachers there. But you know, my parents don't speak English, even today. They knew very little about the school system or they couldn't really communicate with administrators

and teachers, and they hoped for the best. They enforced the importance [00:15:00] of going to school, but beyond that, they weren't able to direct me toward college, which they imagined that I would go to, at some point.

JC: What was your experience going through the Columbia program like?

JF: It was all another outlet for freedom and exploration among my peers. I remember I was part of a program called Career Beginnings, as a junior, and that program offered some kind of internship in a profession that you were interested in, and for some reason I thought that I wanted to be a psychiatrist. [00:16:00] Probably because of all of the dysfunctionalities of my household. So, I interned with a psychiatrist for a moment, which was odd because psychiatrists are weird and not particularly communicative, and the program was really important because it really took me through the process of applying to college. That was its purpose. I was prepared for a college admissions process, so financial aid, essay writing, the SAT – oh, the SAT. The SAT. The first time I took the SAT, my score was horrendous. It was the lowest score you could possibly get, and then they [00:17:00] paid for a Kaplan SAT and my score jumped exponentially, and I think that's what got me into Brown.

So, SAT prep, essay writing, extracurricular activities, producing a well-rounded high school applicant. We visited some colleges. I was enamored with Wesleyan. That's where I wanted to go. I didn't want to go to Brown, at all. I had a great time at Wesleyan, and because of that I wanted to go to Wesleyan, and I didn't know about the Ivy Leagues or what that meant. Even though my brother, Giovanni, [00:18:00] was admitted to Columbia, maybe three years or four before I got to Brown.

But that's interesting, that this gender thing is interesting, because my brother Giovanni was known as the smart one in the family, so he was tracked and expected to do great things. My parents wanted me to go to college but I don't know that they expected me to do great things. I also got left back in second grade. This is another gender issue. Because I was confined to the home, and my parents didn't speak English, I entered school without the ability to speak [00:19:00] the language. So I didn't speak English for a long time, and my early childhood experience in school was completely traumatic because I was tested. Speaking Spanish at the time was stigmatized, interestingly enough, even though the movements that were burgeoning

right at the moment of my birth were arguing for ESL, the teaching of English as a second language, and full integration, language integration, in the teaching of science, math, and other subjects. There's a school in the Bronx, in fact, that is a product of that period, whose name escapes me right now, [00:20:00] but it was the first school in the United States to teach the full curriculum in both languages.

But by the time I got to kindergarten and elementary school, there had been a conservative restoration and a transformation of those higher ideals and aspirations of the '60s and '70s, and so I felt – and the young people I studied with – we were tested, we were treated as if we were children of a lesser god and assumed to be incapable, academically, [00:21:00] because we didn't speak the language. I was aware of that, as a child. So, I got left back in second grade. My father, who's my alpha and my omega, my savior in the family unit, he went to the school and said, "Well, she can read in Spanish. If she can't read in English, you've got a problem, and it's your problem, not hers or ours." So, my mother – my parents were very particular about us speaking Spanish and only Spanish in the household – my mother instructed me in Spanish. So, he said, "She's not going to be left back. You're moving her forward." I don't know how he managed that, but I continued on.

It wasn't until I got to [00:22:00] sixth grade, junior high school, that my reading skills improved exponentially, through the work of this teacher, Ms. [Muhavir?], at Junior High School 22 in the Bronx, who just gave us reading drills every day. We started the day with reading drills and it was in junior high school that I became academically competent, and again, there was a jump from the lowest reading level class to the highest, which was 7GWC1. GWC stands for George Washington Carver. Yes, so this was actually one of those schools, one of those really important schools in the Bronx that instilled [00:23:00] its students with a strong sense of black history, mainly. Good teachers, committed, and I was in a marching band. Up until then, those were the best years of my life.

So, I was in the marching band. I remember that. That was a very exciting and important thing. I was a baton twirler. We marched over the Brooklyn Bridge and won a prize for the best marching band during the one hundredth anniversary of the Brooklyn Bridge. I think one hundred.

JC: I remember that anniversary.

JF: So, those years were important for me, actually, now that I think about it. Creatively, just being a baton twirler, but in terms of fitness [00:24:00] and doing something that I perceived to be fun and meaningful, with a cohort of my peers, in a school where my reading deficiency was finally resolved. Yes, so those teachers were probably '60s activists who were probably on the right side of the fence during the very divisive teacher strike of 1968. I wish I had known, then, something about that history, but I didn't learn that history until many, many moons later. So, that was junior high school. [00:25:00]

JC: So, then you get to the Columbia program where the entire design is to get you into elite colleges.

JF: Yes, and I was in a high school history class and my teacher – I think it was my junior year, I liked history – was a Brown student. She was a Brown student, and she suggested that I apply to Brown. My chemistry teacher suggested that I apply for a scholarship through the British American Educational [00:26:00] Foundation to do another year of high school in England, in their private schools, which are known as the public schools, before going to college. He figured that I needed more academic training before college. I imagine. His wife was on the board of the British American Educational Foundation. Mr. [Album?] is his name. So, I took all of the Regents exams. I don't know if you know the Regents Exams in New York and in math, science, and English. Which I think is phenomenal training, and should be mainstreamed [00:27:00] in the public schools. It still exists, but it's optional.

JC: Really? It's not still required?

JF: It wasn't required in my day, either.

JC: I guess, I went to Hunter.

JF: Oh, yes, it wasn't required.

JC: It was required for us. We weren't taught – it was assumed that we would study on our own, but we had to take all of them.

JF: Yes, no, I was part of a small cohort of students at Manhattan Center who were Regents students and were expected to get a Regents diploma.

JC: Oh, that was what it was. There was a specific Regents diploma, but for us it wasn't an option. I didn't realize that that was a specific diploma rather than a generalized one.

JF: Yes, it's a specific diploma. There's the general diploma and then there's the Regent's diploma, and so I really liked my science and math teachers. I remember at Murray Bergtraum, I had a black – my only black teacher – [00:28:00] was a math teacher, and that was, looking back, that was important and phenomenal for me. First of all, he was an excellent teacher and he was black. All my other teachers were white.

JC: At Manhattan Center?

JF: All of my teachers were white. In junior high school, my teachers and the principle was black, and that made a difference. Huge difference. Although I think Ms. Muhavir was Jewish? The sixth-grade teacher who raised all of our – not mine – just all of our reading scores sky rocketed after she was done with us. Yes, no, [00:29:00] all my teaches were white, but I remember that teacher was black. My teachers were white at Manhattan Center. All of my teachers were black, except maybe for like the gym teacher. So anyway, my history teacher was at Brown. She told me that she went to Brown and that I should consider Brown, and I remember that in a conversation we had about the Cold War, I wanted to know more about the USSR. I was like, "Well, they might have something of substance to teach American society." I was aware of capitalism. Right?

Generally speaking. [00:30:00] I had a sense – not because I learned it at home – I had a sense that there was something wrong with capitalism. I don't know where I got that idea from. Perhaps because of my father's conversations about poverty, growing up.

JC: Well, and rotten infrastructure, growing up surrounded by rotten infrastructure.

JF: Yes, but because my life revolved around a dilapidated urban environment, I was not aware of class, of the extent of class inequality in the United States until I got to Brown.

JC: Because that was why I was wondering about Columbia. So, the Columbia program was not housed –

JF: Yes, it was housed at Columbia and I guess, no, in fact, that must have had an impact [00:31:00] on me because I remember the last day I took the bus, the cross town bus, from 116 Street where Manhattan Center is housed, in East Harlem, to Columbia. I remember telling myself, “Oh my God, I’m never going back to East Harlem,” in part because I remember the crack vials washing down 116 Street all the way to the school. There were abandoned buildings everywhere. I was sensitive to that. I remember actually before going to school in East Harlem, walking [00:32:00] to my school, my elementary school, 64, in the Bronx not far from where I lived, my father walked me to school and everywhere there was an abandoned building. I was aware of the built environment, and I loved the Dominican Republic so much because it was beautiful and there were trees and my family lived in poverty but it looked different. It didn’t look as dilapidated and ugly as life in the Bronx, in New York.

So, yes, I was on campus at Columbia. Although I don’t know [00:33:00] that we ever got a tour of the campus, and we were mainly confined to one building, Ferris Booth Hall, but I did take that class, this calculus class, and I don’t remember the building, now. So, I definitely waked on campus, but mainly we were confined to Ferris Booth Hall, which is just outside Broadway. So, we didn’t hang out on campus a lot. Anyway, so I remember that after that debate we had in class, I’m sure that that debate must have signaled to the teacher [00:34:00] that this kid might be Brown material. So, I applied to Brown but I had no interest in going to Brown and I applied to Wesleyan and a number of other schools. I was a B student. Because of all of the other, because I barely passed all my other classes – the classes I didn’t like – that brought my grade point average down, but I did very well in all of the other, interestingly enough, academic, traditionally academic, classes.

So, the only school I got into was Brown University. I was forlorn, devastated. I didn't get into [00:35:00] Wesleyan, where I wanted to go. So, I had no choice, and I think that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. But I deferred, so I applied to enter the class of 1992. I graduated from high school in 1988 and Mr. Album had insisted that I apply to go to one of these public schools in England. I was interviewed. I remember there was a very petrifying woman who interviewed me. She was old and matronly and very strict, and I was not very comfortable in that interview [00:36:00] environment, but I got into the program that was initiated by the British American Educational Foundation and I was accepted to Charterhouse in Godalming, England. A blue-blooded campus, comparable to Eton. Now, I had to convince my parents to let me go to England, and they were not happy about the proposition. Part of the contract that American students signed was that they had to stay in England the whole year, or in Europe. They couldn't come back home, in part because when students come back home, they're less likely to go back. It was hard. [00:37:00]

The first three or four months were grueling, unforgiving. I missed home. I was in this foreign environment. Literally, some of the kids were flown in to the campus. I mean, that's where I really got a sense of class differences in the world. I made amazing friends, and I was able to travel, so interestingly enough, there was an opportunity in the winter break, during the winter break, to either go to the USSR or Spain. I went to the USSR. Right at the moment when the Berlin Wall [00:38:00] was about to fall. I went to France, I went to Paris, I travelled in Italy, I went to Switzerland, and that experience made my life at Brown bearable because all of my peers at Brown had travelled around the world. So, I didn't experience the difficulty that so many of my African American and Latino peers experienced at Brown, in terms of adjustment. I mean, I did experience some adjustment problems, but I had already been through the war at a public school in England, studying with that nation's ruling class.

JC: Right, so you came back as cosmopolitan. [00:39:00]

JF: So, I was cosmopolitan.

JC: You weren't just diversity. You were cosmopolitan.

JF: Oh, my God, absolutely. I was totally cosmopolitan. Yes. And I also studied – I did A levels, which were the British exams that advanced high school students take which count as college classes, although I didn't use that college credit at Brown. I could have. But that was important preparation, both academically and socially, I think.

JC: So, [00:40:00] I imagine coming back to Brown, if you'd gone directly from the Bronx to Brown, the sense of alienation would have been equivalent, or whatever, but this way, in fact, you were actually kind of coming home. You were coming back to the US.

JF: Yes, no, I think that if I had experienced that level of alienation and if I had realized the level of class inequality that existed in the world, in the United States, it would have been a lot more devastating to me. I mean, I was aware of that at Brown, but I had already been shocked in foreign territory which made the [00:41:00] experience at Brown just less, less psychologically destructive. I struggled with those issues at Brown, but I feel like I was cushioned and protected, having already been through that experience elsewhere. Yes, my peers, many of whom went to much better schools than I did, the black and Latino students, who went to in fact private schools, they were having all kinds of mental breakdowns. [00:42:00] I decided to fight. I guess, on campus.

JC: You said you took the trip to the USSR, it was the moment when, in a sense, the debate about the end of the Cold War and did capitalism win was on the horizon. Would you say that the phenomenological, or the experience of class, but then also the learning both through the travel and whatever you were studying, did that mean that when you arrived on the Brown campus you felt like you were kind of politicized, or not yet?

JF: I think I was political. I was asking questions about the world, [00:43:00] different systems., the different systems of the world. I didn't learn much about the Russian Revolution in the USSR, right? I essentially visited a society that was palpably in crisis. I remember there was this tension in the air, and I remember that there was a very strong black market that hadn't been there before, we were told. My visit to the USSR was definitely not [00:44:00] revelatory or a positive representation of socialism, at all. So, it was actually quite depressing. The housing

structure, the lack of food. I remember eating the food and it was awful and we were getting really good food, we were told. But I loved the Russian people. The Russian people were not the evil – Not the evil caricatures that we painted them out to be. [00:45:00] Yes.

So, I don't know if I've answered your question. I think I was – I was not political. I was interested in knowledge. I remember I studied literature in England for A levels, and I also studied literature at Brown. I studied literature, I think in the end, because of my problem with the English language at a very early age, and this was my way of resolving that problem. Or overcompensating for what I perceived to be – [00:46:00] What's the word I'm looking for? A disadvantage that I spoke Spanish, that Spanish was my first language. But no, I was just fascinated by the world and I was aware, and I was increasingly aware, of inequality, and I remember my best friend from junior high school, who's still my BFF, Janette Reyes, I mean, she didn't go to college. She wasn't going to college! She was working at McDonald's, probably, at that point.

I definitely had a sense that there was no reason why I should be going to college and not Janette, or my other peers. Right? They were no different. I didn't think of myself as [00:47:00] any different than – yes, I mean, intellectually, I didn't think there was a difference. It was clear that I was the beneficiary of all of these opportunities. I was at the right place at the right time. I went to the right school. I got linked up with Columbia University. My chemistry teacher had to choose a student, he chose me. So, it was clear to me that my cohort, growing up, just didn't have the opportunities that I did, and there was no reason why they couldn't do exactly the same thing. So, I went into school with that, with a strong sense of that. [00:48:00]

I'll tell you a little story about the only admission I got to college. I didn't get the Brown acceptance letter. I got a postcard inviting me – congratulating me – and inviting me to some kind of orientation program for recently admitted students. It was like the weekend –

JC: Right, the weekend in whatever it was, March or April where you go for the – right, and you go and you stay with a student on campus.

JF: So, what I didn't get – I thought I hadn't gotten into anywhere. I started applying to all of these other schools, and Mercedes Dominique, who was one of the recruiters at Brown – she's now part of the administration – she called me up on the phone and [00:49:00] said, "You're

coming to Brown. You're coming to Brown, right?" I was like, "Well, am I in? I didn't get an admission letter." "Yes, you did! You're in!" It must have gotten lost in the mail. So, then I said yes and I told her that I was probably going to defer, and Mercedes followed up. She was hell-bent on me going to Brown.

JC: Did you go to that weekend?

JF: I did, I did, I think I did go to that weekend. I think. But I wasn't thrilled about Brown.

JC: I was going to say, it clearly did not make a strong impression.

JF: Ho hum. I was like, ho hum, I'm not at Wesleyan.

JC: What did you think was going to be better about Wesleyan? Because in my mind, Wesleyan and Brown, I mean, many people applied to both of them [00:50:00] and it's a little smaller, so what did you think was –

JF: Okay, I knew nothing about college other than what I learned in this program with like over one hundred students. I knew nothing about – I had a great time at Wesleyan, that's all. I had a great time at Wesleyan. There was a party. I remember people were smoking pot everywhere and it was legal to smoke pot on campus, I think. I, of course, was not – I was introduced to drugs at Brown, interestingly enough. I smoked my first... I took the first hit, or maybe it was a brownie, my junior year at Brown, at some party, actually, at Amanda Lewis's [00:51:00] party, off-campus. But I just thought that wow, this is incredible. I was attracted to student life and of course, I was coming from an environment where my parents imprisoned me in their Bronx apartment, so I was ready to explore life, socially, in the world.

That's all. I knew that Brown was liberal, but so was Wesleyan. So, I was like, "Okay, I'm going to Brown, but before, I'm going to go to England." So, I arrived at Brown. I was part of the class of 1993, and the class of 1993, as you probably know, was the first class [00:52:00] admitted to Brown with a need-blind policy, which meant that the admissions officers didn't look at the student's ability to pay before students were admitted. All the other classes were need

aware. So, I entered the campus at a time when there was a buzz about the fact that I was part of the first need blind class, that was the most diverse class in the history of the university. There was already an ongoing movement on campus to raise awareness about the university's [00:53:00] continued need aware policy, so we were also the mistake. I don't know if you were aware of this, or this conversation.

JC: I was, yes.

JF: I remember walking on the campus green and looking at some kind of installation that students had put up identifying the number of students that would not be admitted on campus because they couldn't afford to pay, and I remember that that was very compelling to me, because that was my story and my narrative. That was Janette! That was my best friend with whom [00:54:00] – we were on the phone around the clock. She was in the Bronx, I was at Brown, and my AT&T bill was astronomical because we were intravenously connected. So, Brown, of course, was a very political campus, as you know, and there was always a conversation about something or other at the Ratty. I sat in Little Africa, even though I'm Latino. Some Latino students sat in Little Africa. I was struggling around issues of race, because as you know, Latinos and especially Dominicans don't identify [00:55:00] as black. In fact, Dominicans in particular organize their entire identity in opposition to Haiti and therefore blackness, a history that we don't have time to go into this evening.

So, it was at Brown that I struggled. There was an issue I struggled with at Brown. It was that. Am I black? Everyone thinks that I'm black. Why am I rejecting my blackness? My hair was an issue. I relaxed my hair. My mother started relaxing my hair when I was a very small child. So, I didn't know what my natural hair looked like, but once you start relaxing your hair, you have to continue relaxing your hair [00:56:00] in order to make it manageable, but I hated relaxers. I remember I wore a Castro hat at Brown for like two years straight, just grappling with this idea of blackness. In fact, I didn't cut it all off until much later, when I was in graduate school.

I was also aware of class differences. Brown is one of the most elite schools in the nation in terms of the students it attracts, and so I was aware of student's cars. When I got there, my roommate – Anna Dodd, I love, we became close buddies –

JC: Where were you? Were you at Pembroke, or [00:57:00] were you down in –

JF: We were in the O zone. The quad.

JC: The quad, okay, it was the quad.

JF: This is the basement of the quad, which was like the worst housing known to man. Yes. Horrific. Horrific housing situation, no lighting, no sunlight. But there was an expectation that we would get this, that, and the third, answering machine, and a million and one things for the, what is it called?

JC: Shared room?

JF: The shared room, and I just couldn't afford that. There was just no way – I couldn't afford, my father was making less than Brown tuition, [00:58:00] literally. So, I was aware of that. I was aware of the fact that most students had studied in private schools. So yes, it's impossible to not be aware of that, which was not necessarily the experience of other black students, as I said previously, and Latino students, many of whom had been to either parochial school or private schools, or the best public schools in the nation. But a disproportionate number of us in that class did come from urban public school environments. Yes, so I don't know, [00:59:00] but I was an English major.

I remember I took Professor Denniston's classes, Black Women Writers, and African American Literature. I took like two or three classes with her, and those classes were transformative. I read *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. Those classes were just, yes. They were politically transformative. I was very shy in class, for the first two years. It wasn't until my junior and senior year that I started speaking up in class. I think that it had a lot to do with [01:00:00] my – My sense that my peers were a lot better prepared than I was, academically. I took a class with a professor, the Goth professor who taught Shakespeare. I remember that class – I took biology. Brown was the place for me because I cannot deal with structure. I needed to do

my own thing, and I took all kinds of different classes. [01:01:00] I wish I had taken others, but yes.

JC: Did you feel like the conversations that you had provoked by your classes carried over into your social life? Were you drawn to friends who had similar academic interests, or how it inform—

JF: No, not at all. I mean, Brown is the most racially segregated environment I had been in, probably even more than the public schools in England. There were black students in England who were Arabs, right, all non-white [01:02:00] people were called black. But there wasn't a segregation in the public schools on the basis of race and ethnicity, in the public schools in England, which are the private, prep schools.

JC: Of course, of course.

JF: No, yes, maybe because the number of students was so small. But it's just because the United — yes. The racial divisions and segregation at Brown was pretty, pretty intense, and so no, I just hung out with students of color, mostly African Americans, in part because of this [01:03:00] ongoing issue around race that I was dealing with. Also, because I think that a lot of the Latino students at Brown, with few exceptions, were not Afro-Latino, and also, and also, I came from an urban experience in New York where African Americans and Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are a team. Or hang out. There are all kinds of conflicts among these groups. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, African Americans, internal conflicts, but ultimately, we all lived together.

Yes, so no, conversations that happened in the classroom didn't spill into [01:04:00] conversations at the Ratty. But there were always political conversations happening, right? There was always an article in *The Spectator* that created a buzz, and we were always engaged. I was always engaged outside of the classroom in some conversation or other. That was pretty amazing. My roommate, Anna Dodd, is gay, and we had quite a number of conversations about her sexuality. In fact, I had my first lesbian experience at Brown, as many women do, I imagine, my junior year. After having, after having [01:05:00] established, in my relationship with my

roommate, that I wasn't, that I didn't imagine that I would ever go there – I imagine that that was part of the conversation, at some point, we had.

What else. It wasn't until my junior year, I think, junior and senior year, once I had a few years under my belt academically, that I started to flourish intellectually, generally speaking. That was also the moment when Suzanne Oboler was hired as a professor to teach Latino Studies, and I took some classes with her that were important. I remember she assigned *Billy Budd* in one of her classes, and my paper was very good, [01:06:00] and I was just immersed, intellectually, in questions of literature and history. I also took a course with Tom McLaughlin. Was it Tom? Bill.

JC: Bill. Yes, he was like the hyper – I just remember he had a great teach-in at the declaration of the Iraq War where, this classic statement, he was like, “How did our oil get under there” – he was hyper-political.

JF: I didn't experience him as such.

JC: Oh, my god, he was –

JF: Oh my, I remember now. He was. He supported all kinds of –

JC: He was always out on the –

JF: He gave talks on the – yes. Yes, the campus green. But I don't remember the teach-in on the Iraq War.

JC: Yes, he had a big teach-in. It was great. I can't remember the name of the building, but [01:07:00] just in this totally ironic – we were all appalled like, what are you doing? He was a mobilizing figure.

JF: So, I took Social and Intellectual History of the United States to the Civil War, and that class was phenomenal. I also took – and so when I started taking, in fact, these classes outside of

English, in History, and Modern Culture and Media, and American Studies, that were deliberately political, right? That's when I think those conversations inside the classroom filtered into conversations I had with students on campus, and in the dorm. Modern [01:08:00] Culture and Media was very important for me, politically.

JC: Which classes?

JF: So, I don't remember, but I took classes with Ashley Smith, graduate students, and David [Ratkin?]. So –

JC: He was huge.

JF: Yes. So, those classes and my study of ideology, and all the post-modernist writers, I think those classes were formative. All the gobbled gook of post-modernism, which that's what I think a lot of it is – it's incomprehensible, you've got to learn a new language – it's ultimately not clear writing. [01:09:00] Some more than others, but having to learn a completely different language and grappling with these big theoretical ideas was probably the most important intellectual experience of my life. Even in terms of thinking critically and analytically about the world, beyond anything I studied in graduate school, for example, as a historian. I wouldn't want to do anything else, but that training, intellectually, in those courses was everything, and challenging. I feel like I worked hard at Brown. I wrote a million and one papers. [01:10:00] I was always at the computer lab. What was it called? I didn't have a computer. The CIT. Oh my God, the CIT was like – my buddies were there. All-nighters at the CIT, was just a way of life for me for the four years I was at Brown. So, intellectually, I think Brown was, again, the most rigorous environment I've been in since, and I'm thankful for that.

JC: And so, when did you actually become more of an activist, alongside your kind of bracing intellectual work that you were doing [01:11:00] in those classes? Where were you reading – how many times did you read Althusser's article on the ISAs? (laughs) (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Every class had that article.

JF: Right. Yes. Really, those are the texts that I remember most. Like, I don't remember anything in *The Bluest Eye* or *Song of Solomon*, even though that was super gorgeous and important for me, but it's the readings in these classes that I still quote. I mean, I still talk to my students about Althusser's ISA. In fact, I have an excellent article – you probably know it – [01:12:00] titled, "Ideology," by James Cavanaugh, that I assign. Not assigned to me at Brown, but because that experience was so important to me, I pass it on to my students and they are equally transformed when they read these texts.

So, it was junior year. My sophomore year there was another group, whose name escapes me, that was doing work around financial aid and minority admission, and I was in and out of those meetings and then my junior year, when I returned, I immersed myself in the organizing meetings that happened everywhere. We went dorm storming. [01:13:00] That's what we called it, to educate students on the issues. We gave speeches in the Ratty. We had teach-ins and rallies on the main green. I think the summer after my sophomore year, a group of students had remained on campus and they had produced a document of over one hundred pages, some kind of study about how Brown could become need blind. That was circulated everywhere. I remember reading it. It was distributed to the administrators, and I had a sense that there had been a long effort that was [01:14:00] pretty meticulous on the part of students to educate the campus on the issue, but also convince administrators that we needed to move in this direction.

I did have a sense that Brown had these lofty aspirations about equality and diversity, but it wasn't willing to make good on that promise. So, I was disgruntled with the university, generally speaking. So, I just became one of the leaders of this movement. That's kind of my personality. [01:15:00] I maybe am a control freak or I'm really interested in developing strategy and arguments and this was an issue near and dear to my heart, right? I mean, I lived this. The story of need blind, or need aware, admission at Brown had consequences for my life, right, in a real way. I might have been one of those students who was not accepted because my parents couldn't afford to pay.

So, before SAMA [Students for Admissions and Minority Aid], however, my sophomore year, I did go on a hiking trip to the White Mountains, somewhere in New Hampshire, and I fractured my – oh, no, I [01:16:00] had torn ligaments and cartilage that summer, and this trip was approaching during, I think at the beginning of the semester, and I was hell-bent on going. I remember Robin Rose, Dean Robin Rose, was at the helm of this expedition into the White

Mountains, and she advised against going. But I felt like I was better, although I was hobbling. I mean, I had torn my ACL. It was pretty serious. I wanted to go. This is one of the experiences that Brown offers that I thought was like, I need to do this now or I'm never going to do it. I also wanted to learn how to fly at Brown, and learn how to scuba dive. But I didn't do either [01:17:00] of those.

But I went hiking against Robin Rose's recommendations, and I had to be ejaculated – that's what I say – evacuated. I had to be evacuated.

JC: You were medevaced?

JF: Yes, it was bad. I don't remember what happened, but I ended up being very sick. I threw up. My body just couldn't handle the stress, because I had just had surgery not long before. So, that's Johanna Fernandez when she was nineteen or twenty. But –

JC: Determined to penetrate the White Mountains.

JF: Right, the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Yes, so okay, so junior year is here and I guess you want to hear the story of what happened [01:18:00] with SAMA. So, I remember that our demand was that Vartan Gregorian, who was the president at the time, agree to siphoning off fifty million for financial aid, and that he would continue to make financial aid a priority during the capital campaign, and that was the argument that we put forth, that the college was saying that it couldn't afford it and we argued it's not a priority. If you see it as a priority, you will make it happen. You will organize expenditures accordingly. It's more important to achieve diversity, both ethnically, racially, and in terms of class, than it is to build a new building, and maybe there are people in the world who might [01:19:00] agree to do both, if you make compelling arguments.

So, we got an enormous amount of red tape form the college. There were a number of meetings we set up that were cancelled. We wrote letters to the president and the administration and to the board. We sent our representatives to make presentations at the board, and we were ignored. So, after at least three years of organizing, we decided that we were going to ask for a meeting with the president at University Hall in April. I think April 20<sup>th</sup>, or 22<sup>nd</sup>, I don't

remember the day, now. [01:20:00] Later I learned that April is the month of occupations in history. From the Russian Revolution to the Paris Commune to, although the Russian Revolution happens later, to the occupations here in the United States during the '60s.

Okay, so we have a meeting with the president. I think someone actually scheduled it. We show up at University Hall very early in the morning. I remember it was raining. It's always raining in Providence. Jesus Christ. It was raining and there were about fifty, sixty, seventy of us. It was not a large group. And we were [01:21:00] determined to have a conversation and we didn't want to be subdivided. We didn't want a small group of representatives to have the – we wanted to be a democratic forum, with the most active members of this emerging group, Students for Aided Minority Admission. Okay, so we show up and the president is not in town. The president is in New York.

JC: Raising money.

JF: Raising money, right. And so, we immediately decide – I don't think we decided to conduct a sit-in. We immediately decided, okay, he's not here, we're sitting in and we're going to wait for him. And so, by 9:00 AM when the doors opened when the doors of University Hall opened – [01:22:00] although I think they open at 8:30 – we say that we're going to stay, and some people say that we held administrators hostage, that they were scared. Meanwhile, all of these students are mostly white, right? It's not like the people from the ghetto who are taking over University Hall. It's a few students of color and mostly white students. The building is closed, officially, and we had planned for a rally outside of the building, or on the main green, at noon. So, [01:23:00] but we're locked in and if we go out, we're told, we can't come back into the building. So, this is a story that was written about in the *Brown Daily Herald*.

So, I'm like, okay, what are we going to do, because we're being dismissed here. There's a situation that people outside need to know about and we can't get out, so I decide I'm going to go to the bathroom. I go to the bathroom and I somehow knew that the bathroom window opened up into the main green. So, I go to the bathroom – I literally had to ask permission. The guards were out. The guards were, university guards, were policing us, and I'm like, "Okay, [01:24:00] I'm going to go to the bathroom," and it's like noon and all the kids are out. I open up the window and I start to give a speech from the window. At that point, I'm trying to get students to

come in, to climb up the window, because this is the assignment, the moral assignment, of our generation, to make Brown need blind. I give some passionate speech, or it's described as such, and I probably talk about my own personal experience growing up in the Bronx and all of my friends who were left behind for no good reason other than class and race, and as students try to climb in, the guards [01:25:00] move in and they literally grabbed an Asian kid and dragged him to the ground. That created mayhem.

Brown students are not used to this kind of violence against them, however subdued. There were a lot of students outside. I would venture to say that there were approximately a thousand students going in and out of the building once the students who were outside broke through the barriers that were created by the guards, with their bodies. So, when this happened, [01:26:00] that led to a scuffle and students stormed the building. It was pretty early on, and then we had like a real operation before us, to figure out. We stayed in the building until very late, and we ordered pizza. There was revelry. We gave speeches. It was like a festival of the oppressed, right, or not so oppressed, at Brown. And it was just an incredible, joyous moment. I, of course, was coordinating with the other leading members of SAMA, who were Libro de la Piana, Elijah Felton, Edie Sar, and others. [01:27:00]

We had an open conversation about what to do, right? Because by eight o'clock, the university had gotten its lawyers, it had gotten some kind of – what is it, we got some document. I don't remember what kind of document it was, but it was some legal document that essentially said that we were violating state law because University Hall is a, it's not just the property of the university, it's actually a state, what? What's the word?

JC: Monument?

JF: It's kind of, some state monument, and so that's why they were able to get the state, not just the municipal, government [01:28:00] involved. The violation was felonious, right. So, of course we didn't know what that meant at the time. So, there was a debate. We opened the floor for a debate on what to do, whether we would leave the building and avoid arrests or if we would come back the next day. There were people on campus, among them our graduate instructors and others, who argued that we should not get arrested, that we should come back the next day and shut down the university and its major operating [01:29:00] headquarters the next day, and

continue in this manner until they met our demands. I argued that we should get arrested. So, did the majority of students. Although not everyone remained in the building, there were two hundred and some odd students who were arrested, and there were at least five hundred students there at the time when the cops were brought in, or the busses, because the cops didn't come onto campus. We were escorted out by the guards and other administrators, but the police vans were outside. [01:30:00] Or, vans that were going to take us to the police headquarters downtown.

So, many students who didn't want to get arrested left. Two hundred and some odd of us stayed and were arrested, and what was important about this moment, for me, was that it was a microcosm of how the world works, and the workings of power, in complicated ways. So, I remember being in University Hall, looking out the window, and seeing one of the students who was hugely involved in [01:31:00] organizing, in the run-up to the sit-in, talking to administrators. He was positioning himself as a mediator and I looked – I was like, what? You need to be up here with us. We need to have a united front. Who died and made you king of this movement? There were administrators who played good cop, there were others who played bad cop. There were more radical articulations of what the next move should be. There were people in the middle, and it was in fact the socialists on campus who argued –

JC: This was [01:32:00] like David Ratkin –

JF: David Ratkin, Ashley Smith, and others, who argued against arrests because arrests would demobilize us. And that's exactly what happened. We got arrested and we were facing felony charges. I could care less. That's just how I roll, and have rolled all my life. Felony? Who cares? My thought was, okay, I have applied to law school and graduate school and the big argument was that if you were going to go to law school, this is going to have an impact on your application.

JC: It's going to go on your permanent record.

JF: It's going to go on your permanent record. So, students were flipping out. Students were flipping out and we had to go to these legal meetings [01:33:00] and everybody went to the legal

meetings and I was like, “Oh Jesus, when will this meeting end? And I have not absorbed anything because I don’t care about” – (recording stops)

## Track 2

JF: –“[00:00:00] any of this.” It was just not interesting to me. I’ve always been driven by what interests me. If it doesn’t interest me, I don’t engage in the conversation, which is not necessarily the best approach to take in life. In part because I was a leader of the movement and I needed to understand the legal ramifications and also its meaning for the students who were involved, and I couldn’t summarily dismiss that. So, we went to court a number of times. I think we ended up having to pay a fine. We had to raise funds to pay these fines. That took a very, very long time, and before long it was the end of the semester, [00:01:00] so the movement was demobilized and we really drew a huge percentage of the student population into this conversation. Not everyone was convinced of all of our demands. Many students believed that maybe this wasn’t possible, but they were in the conversation and they showed up to the teach-ins and mostly they were outside of University Hall during that rally that led into the occupation.

So, yes, it made sense that given that we have so many students interested in participating actively in protests, and in this conversation, we need to mobilize a larger number of the members of campus, including administrators, or deans [00:02:00] into this movement. I don’t know that the administrators were going to fall. In any case, so that’s how SAMA died. I’ll tell you a story. This was a thrilling moment in my life. I learned a lot. I was engaged. My life seemed meaningful at Brown in ways more profound than before. I felt like I was fighting for something larger than myself. I mean, everything that captures the imagination of people and [00:03:00] that compels them to continue to involve themselves in movements. I didn’t go to classes during this period, so there was an enormous amount of work I had to do at the end of the semester and I ended up getting a number of incompletes.

So, I always worked at Brown. I worked in the cash register at the Ratty, in the snack bars. What are the snack bars?

JC: Let’s see, there was the one at Pembroke and where was the other r– I remember the other, it was –

JF: I think I worked in the one at Pembroke. Where they sold – I don't know, I don't remember.

JC: Yes, they had pizza up there, at the Gate.

JF: The Gate, right, that's where I worked. I worked in the [00:04:00] cash register at the Gate. I drove the van, the campus van.

JC: Oh my goodness, campus van.

JF: Remember that? Uh-huh, I drove the campus van.

JC: The protected lives of Brown –

JF: Students, exactly. So, I needed to work because I hadn't worked with all this movement stuff. I didn't have a lot of money, and I owed bills, and my phone bill was astronomical.

JC: Were you living on campus or off campus?

JF: I was living in Slater Hall, right next to University Hall, which was phenomenal housing, by the way.

JC: Yes, it was beautiful.

JF: Yes, oh my god. So, I decided that I was going to stay at Brown for graduation and work during graduation. [00:05:00] I put all the hours in that I didn't put in while I was taking over University Hall. Of all my years at Brown, that was the moment that gave me a sense of the wealth of the college and its student body. I had never been – I had never stayed for graduation, and the campuses transformed into this fairy tale of an environment. Having had that experience, and that struggle with the university in which the university pretty much threw the book at us, and then going to this event [00:06:00] on which they spend, I don't know, millions of dollars,

made me bitter. I mean, it made me bitter because I was, I don't know, I was completely disillusioned. I was like, oh my God, it's all an act, it's all rhetoric. This is really where its priorities lie, and this is the infrastructure and the apparatus that keeps Brown and the ruling class in its place. Graduation and these ceremonies are the anchor, right? This is where [00:07:00] the wealthy donors –

JC: The fundraising begins.

JF: This is where the fundraising begins. This is where wealthy donors are wined and dined, and the last thing they want to learn about is that the campus has been occupied by rowdy kids who want working-class and poor kids from neighborhoods like the Bronx to end up at Brown. But I'll tell you what killed me. So, I don't know what the hell I was doing. I don't remember, I don't think I was serving food, unclear. But I had to get from one section of the campus to the other, and I had to walk [00:08:00] up, what's the main street? From Thayer through campus to the main green, and as I'm walking – I don't remember the name of that little corridor, by where the biology classes, by Solomon Hall – so, there's a little corridor from Thayer that you take, that you pass Solomon Hall, and in that part of the campus there was a band that was hired to entertain the guests, and that band was splaying a song by Juan Luis Guerra.

Juan Luis Guerra is the most famous, or one of the most famous, singers in Latin America. He's Dominican, and he studied at Berklee School of Music in [00:09:00] Boston, and he made popular the song titled, "In Search of a Visa for a Dream Come True." In which he documents, in his video, how people leave the Dominican Republic in small boats and lose their lives in the open seas, in order to get to the United States. And so, this – when this song started playing, when this band started playing this song, I started crying. I started sobbing. I'm like, how dare these motherfuckers prance around and dance to a song about people fleeing poverty in the Dominican Republic to come to the United States at a moment when the fucking college has [00:10:00] treated us like criminals because we're trying to address precisely these issues of inequality and access to education at Brown? Devastating. Devastating.

I imagine that that moment just changed my life. I mean, I'm not a crier. I don't cry! I wish I were a crier. My life would have probably been more bearable, psychologically, if I cried. I bawled right there. I was hysterical, and so that was the end of my junior year at Brown, and I

came back senior year and I proceeded to [00:11:00] focus on writing my thesis, my senior thesis. I was at Butler – it's not, Butler Library's at Columbia. What's the name of the library?

JC: The Rock. Rockefeller.

JF: So, I spent an enormous amount of time at the Rock, reading and studying and hanging out. It was at that time that this woman by the name of Angel [Breuner?] started visiting me at the Rock. I didn't know her, but she, of course, knew me because of all of my involvement on campus. She totally swept me off my feet and [00:12:00] I started seeing her, my senior year, for like a nanosecond. Then she dumped me, and I was devastated. Yes, I was coming of age, politically and intellectually, and I had to make a decision. Am I going to go to graduate school or am I going to go to law school? My parents expect me to go to law school, and I applied to both, got in to both, and I decided to go to graduate school because I wanted to continue the intellectual exploration that was so vital to my time at Brown. Of course, graduate school was a completely different animal.

[00:13:00] I decided to go to Columbia, in part because I wanted to come back home. I didn't get funding at Columbia. I had gotten funding at the University of Chicago. But this is what I do. I've done in my life. I wanted to be here, so I went to Columbia without funding. Another situation, right, in which full funding of graduate students came later, while I was already on my way out, and the same situation we see at Brown. Brown students now get fully funded if they can't afford, meanwhile I owe over \$300,000 in loans. [00:14:00] So, because of the loans I got at Brown and at Columbia. So, that's my story. So I decided to go to graduate school at Columbia, and I think that that experience in SAMA, which by the way my friend, Seneca Mudd was studying abroad. He was studying in Tanzania, and he read about us and me in the newspaper in his travels. That movement was, I'm sure, the largest student movement [00:15:00] of that decade, in terms of the number of students that were involved, the occupation. It went on for a number of years. I think my involvement in that movement certainly influenced my decision to study social movements.

JC: That's what I was going to ask, yes.

JF: In graduate school. I mean it was complicated. I was becoming a radical. I mean, I was introduced to Marxism at Brown. I don't know that the funders of Brown want to hear this, but I was introduced to Marxism at Brown and I became a Marxist shortly thereafter. So, it was formative, and [00:16:00] yes, I think Brown is one of the most rigorous and probably one of the best institutions in the nation, and I've now taught at a number of them. But the level of rigorous intellectual engagement I experienced at Brown was singular. I don't know if that was your experience.

JC: That was absolutely my experience.

JF: Does everyone experience Brown like this?

JC: I mean, my story was that, you know how you said that you wanted to go to Wesleyan? I didn't want to go to Wesleyan. I wanted to go to Yale. I didn't get into Yale. I got into Wesleyan, and Brown, and Cornell, and Chicago, but didn't get into Yale.

JF: Which is where you wanted to [00:17:00] go.

JC: Which is where I wanted to go, because I thought it was the most intellectually rigorous of all of them, and that's what I wanted, and my best friend went to Yale and as it turns out, my experience at Brown was a thousand times more engaging – in part because I did the whole MCM, the super heady – I was politically engaged. Going in with some draw to that, the critical spirit of MCM, and I mean, yes, absolutely formative. Absolutely formative.

JF: Yes, formative. One thing I should add is that during my sophomore or junior year, I also partnered up with one of my only white friends at Brown, Amanda Lewis, whom I love, who's also a professor now [00:18:00] at the University of Illinois, Chicago, in Sociology. We partnered up and we started a Saturday School together and travelled to one of, like Broad Street. I guess we were teaching high school students. There was some program we initiated and we did this for like a semester, and that was a cool thing, that we could actually borrow cars from the university through its community service center. I don't know what it was called. And explore

the city and engage in public service. Yes. So that was, that was [00:19:00] important and mostly it helped me develop this very important relationship with Amanda Lewis. I don't know that I would have, that our paths would have crossed otherwise, on campus.

JC: Of course, there is the kind of irony that it was this crucible, or I liked how you described it as a kind of microcosm of understanding relationships of power, but that part of the idea was to create opportunities for those figures who, as the installation on the green demonstrated, were included, but also, in a sense, to make the university itself better, so that that's part of the sense of the kind of hypocrisy, is there. [00:20:00] The lack of recognition that this actually was for the university itself.

JF: No, definitely. Yes, the university was just hostile. The administrators were hostile. They were, at first, indifferent in meetings that I participated in, and then when we took over University Hall, they were vicious, mean, and hostile. And, okay, I haven't told you the crowning jewel of this story. So, then I show up at my parent's house, after working during graduation week. My parents don't speak English, [00:21:00] so they're like, "Oh, we got this letter from Brown. Read it to us." And I don't have this letter. This letter essentially said that there had been a crisis on campus and I had been involved, and that unfortunately, our students had been influenced by outside forces.

JC: I remember that.

JF: It was a page out of the McCarthy Era. Yes.

JC: I remember that letter.

JF: You remember that letter?

JC: I didn't get it, but I had friends who did, and like –

JF: I was like, [01:22:00] I was reading – of course, I didn't read this to my parents. My parents would have a heart attack. I was reading this and it was literally fantastical. I didn't believe what I was reading. I had been reading about McCarthyism! That semester! And it was so unapologetically vicious and strategic in its method.

JC: That it's the foreign influence. It's not coming from within.

JF: The foreign influence, yes, it's not coming from within. [00:23:00] Yes, it's outside forces, outside agitators, essentially have turned our campus into a war zone. And the implication was that perhaps over the break, you might want to pull your kid aside and tell them to cool out, and to grow up.

JC: It was patronizing.

JF: And to grow up, and to essentially stop being gullible, right? We were gullible kids who were manipulated by the socialists. [00:24:00]

JC: When in fact, your experience was precisely the opposite, which was that this is your critical awareness.

JF: I mean, I was one of the leading members of this movement! So, for me to read this, it was devastating. Yes. I read it, I put it aside, and I didn't even keep the letter. I kept it moving.

JC: Well, it's presumably in the university archives somewhere.

JF: It's somewhere, right. Yes. But how did you hear about this letter?

JC: So, do you remember Penny Lewis?

JF: Of course!

JC: Penny was one of my closest friends. Penny and I went to Hunter together. We're still close. I mean, our lives have – but I don't remember if she got one of them, or – because she was, of course, super close [00:25:00] to David Ratkin. She was dating Anthony –

JF: [Arnauve?].

JC: Arnauve. So, I remember she was up in arms, and I remember we all had – at graduation, we put the need blind now on our mortar boards. I think she was in the occupation.

JF: She was involved, yes.

JC: She was in the occupation. I was a dork and working on my – after I finished my thesis, I had like, papers.

JF: Oh right, that was your senior year.

JC: It was my senior year, and I was a super dork.

JF: No, if you're writing a thesis you have to be a super dork.

JC: And she had staggered and I think she had tons of incompletes from that time.

JF: No, Penny? She was my partner in crime at the –

JC: Oh, you were with her at the CIT!

JF: At the CIT.

JC: I have to write her. [00:26:00] (laughs)

JF: We were like, there. We, oh my God, it was horrible.

JC: Because I would go visit her because I had a computer because I would go visit her. I would bring her stuff there. We would bring her coffee and food.

JF: Yes, she, now that you mention it, yes, we were both there around the clock. We were the only ones. We were there until the very end, until the very, very end, finishing up incompletes.

JC: Her junior year, I spent a lot of time with her because I lived up on Congden Street, and she lived in the apartment just behind me and she was actually sharing the apartment with my boyfriend so I kind of half lived with her and she would have to schlepp all the way down there.

JF: Small world. And she's in the academy.

JC: Yes, she teaches at CUNY! She's in the [01:27:00] Labor Relations –

JF: Right, she's been trying to reel me into this project.

JC: Because she was doing lots of stuff on Occupy.

JF: Right, but she's now the co-author of a volume on the history of New York, I think, or activism in New York, and she's, yes, she's reached out to me a few times. Yes, but we were partners in crime at the CIT, yes.

JC: So, I think we've gone on for like two hours, as you predicted we would. So, I think we ended quite nicely, but do you have any concluding thoughts?

JF: Any concluding thoughts? It's my understanding that the student composition at Brown [00:28:00] changed tremendously after SAMA, that they – and I don't know if this is true, I mean, this is for historians and students themselves to explore – but that the class composition of students of color changed for the worse, and that they admitted wealthy students of color in the years thereafter, yes. No, no, it was nasty. It was a nasty fight.

JC: And then this hasn't been changed by the implementation –

JF: I'm sure it's changed since Ruth Simmons implemented need blind admission. But for a minute there, after that struggle, student protest [00:29:00] diminished exponentially. That's what I've heard. That's what I heard in those years that followed while I was at Columbia.

JC: So, we end with a project for future historians to –

JF: For a project for future historians –

JC: – to investigate. An important genealogy, I think, of that kind of incredibly current, pressing debates about you could say class and race, in the elite institutions, which have returned in force in the past few years. And the kind of question of the connection between race and class, which has been perversely disarticulated I think, in ways that, in fact, [00:30:00] raising this issue of a turn to wealthier students of color may actually speak to, and I think particularly interesting, in particularly interesting ways.

JF: Right, well, what happened – its policy, in fact, reflects the growing stratification in American society, right? And the statistics are harrowing, but students of color in urban centers are now, more than ever, disconnected from the possibility of going to Brown. Then there's the white working class. [00:31:00] Yes. I mean, I'm not thinking of this academically or politically because it's such a personal story, but – Yes, I mean, issues of class and race, we know, are interconnected. Although, in the United States in this new period, in public discourse, the working class is imagined as white. Right? And people of color –

JC: It's a set of identity recognition issue.

JF: Right. Are overly concerned with issues of identity and race, [00:32:00] not necessarily racism. So, I think what's important about SAMA is that we tried to theorize and articulate the ways in which people of color are disproportionately affected by poverty and issues of class

because of racism, but the project meant to in fact benefit working class white students, who were also underrepresented on campus. And that was really important work, at that time, right? There were debates around affirmative action, and I remember we had teach-ins around affirmative action and educationals, and materials on the politics of affirmative action. And [00:33:00] in many ways, the politics of SAMA, which underscored the importance of race and class, are the politics that would benefit American society today in public discourse.

One thing I want to share, and I don't know why I want to mention this or what to make of it. Many years later, I read letters that students had written to me during the occupation, which I think is a beautiful thing because there is something earnest and genuine and committed about young people, generally, but specifically Brown students who are like, serious. And a whole host of letters that I don't know if I read, because I was [00:34:00] along with others, at the helm of this movement, in meetings, giving speeches, going dorm storming, dealing with the lawyers. I mean, it was a full-time operation, day and night. But students, some students were thankful, others were angry. I read those letters and I don't even know where they are now, and I was saddened that I hadn't actually taken the time to respond to them. I don't even know if I read them, at the time. But this is what [00:35:00] struggle looks like, right, in the heat of – in the cauldron of conflict and crisis, you can't slow down to smell the roses and pontificate on whether what I said at this meeting was appropriate or not.

Anyway, I found those letters a number of years ago and maybe I'll go back to them and write and try to find the students on Facebook or Twitter.

JC: You could donate them to the archive.

JF: Or respond. Or I could donate them to the archive. Yes. Yes, that's a thought. No, absolutely, I should do that.

JC: Because I think this is an opportunity for you, also, to commit papers [00:36:00] associated with oral history.

JF: Oh wow, yes, definitely. Definitely, I'll do that. I'll think about what I should donate.

JC: That would be wonderful. Because I agree that the memory of this movement, and precisely because of the articulation of the issues of race and class – and also how it helps us to better understand what was happening surrounding the intersection between a kind of intellectual ferment and a political ferment, I think that it just helps to reframe contemporary discussions about this history and contemporary politics in really important ways.

JF: Now that you are mentioning this, the occupation happened on the heels of the LA riots.

[00:37:00]

JC: I vividly remember it, absolutely.

JF: And so, what's outrageous about this ruling class institution of ours is that in the context of this growing conflict in American society, they refused to initiate a real conversation and do their part. But I'm emotionally committed and connected to Brown because that was the institution where I grew up politically and intellectually. Objectively speaking, however even though Brown has a reputation of being to the left of most institutions in the nation, it's a ruling class institution! [00:38:00] Connected to sites of power in the United States, that reproduces its ruling class, and of course it's going to respond viciously. And historically, we know, the shortcomings of liberalism, right? That in fact, in revolutionary situations or moments of upturn and struggle, liberals who are crossed have deployed the worst kind of repression against radicals and movement activists, so.

JC: But it thankfully created the conditions of possibility for you to go on in certain ways, [00:39:00] to do the – or, it created the conditions of possibility is too strong a statement, but it was an important crucible.

JF: Yes, I know you want to end this on the positive note. Yes, I mean, that's the tragedy and the contradiction of Brown in this moment, right? That it actually articulated, in the classroom, the highest aspirations of society, and even in its mission. But it was [00:40:00] hostile and viciously opposed to, to the young people who were attempting to make that a concrete and real possibility for so many others. So, I think that institutions like Brown were forced to extend the privilege of

their education to people like me, and even white working class people, by social movements, [00:41:00] but ultimately the educational project at Brown, as brilliant as it is and phenomenal, is mainly preserved for a particular class of Americans. So, I was one of the lucky ones. I am grateful for my time at Brown. It transformed me, but Brown didn't give me shit, right? The people who took over University Hall in the '60s, those are the people that I'm going to thank, because [00:42:00] clearly, if it had been for Brown, working class white people wouldn't have access to the damn institution! Right? So, yes, I'm not going to give Brown a pass on this one. Sorry. Yes, no.

I was able to study at Brown because, I don't know the history. We knew the history then. We rattled off the history of student struggle in the '60s. In 1974 or '75, some insignificant percentage of African Americans were admitted to Brown, after this massive struggle. Right? [00:43:00] I think there were some struggles in the late '60s and then in the '70s and ultimately that struggle, those struggles, made Brown the place that it is today. And Brown fought, kicking and screaming, all the way to the end.

JC: I think that's a great place to end. Thank you. Thank you. I can't remember if I'm supposed to say (inaudible). So, well, I guess we're ending the interview now at 6:56. Oh, my goodness. So, thank you to Johanna Fernandez.

JF: Thank you for the time you've taken to hear my story.

JC: Well, it was a pleasure.

JF: Appreciate it. [00:44:00] (background dialogue; not transcribed)

- END -