Interview with **Paula Giddings**
Date: December 12, 1988
Interviewer: Judy Richardson
Camera Rolls: 2080-2083
Sound Rolls: 236B-237
Team: B

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2080]
[sound roll #236B]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, camera roll twenty, eighty-one. Sound two, three, six.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me why you went to Howard. What were you expecting to get out of it? And you had mentioned something about Freedom Rides in there.

00:00:26:00

Paula Giddings:

I grew up in Yonkers, New York. And grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood in Yonkers.

00:00:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

We're gonna cut for a second.

[cut]

00:00:35:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second, Judy. OK.

00:00:43:00

Interviewer:

OK? OK. Why did you go to Howard University? What were you looking for? And you mentioned the Freedom Rides.

00:00:50:00

Paula Giddings:

I grew up in Yonkers, New York and in a predominately White neighborhood feeling that sense of isolation that so many Black people felt in that period of time. Yonkers was always a, a racist city. And I remember from the very beginning name calling and that kind of thing that happened [clears throat] to the point that even my mother had to go to school to give a civics lesson to the young children there because of everything that was going on. I remember always wondering the reasons behind all this. I think that that kind of questioning was more important to me even than actually what was happening. And that became particularly intense by 1961. And I remember this very quickly. It was the first thing I really remember in terms of the movement and everything that was going on, and it was the Freedom Rides in 1961. And the thing, I guess, that was so compelling about it was not only because I was then thirteen years old, so I was old enough to begin to get a sense of things, but again those questions: what would make this happen, what would create that kind of

violence, what gave those young people and I think I related to them because they were young people in my generation. What gave them that courage to continue on those rides at the expense maybe of their, of their lives? And when I think back, I think it separated me from even a lot of the Blacks that I began, that I knew in Yonkers. No one seemed, else seemed to be asking those questions. And I was determined—and I don't know if I intellectualized it all and had a great racial analysis in this period. But I knew I needed to find a community of like minded Black people. And this certainly was very much in my mind in 1965 when it was time for me to go to school, to college. And [clears throat] at that time, the UNCF, if I remember correctly, had a—it was interesting. They had a program to help Black students get into predominately White schools as well. 'Cause this is the period when White schools—

00:02:56:00

Interviewer:

Sorry—

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

—say United Negro College Fund.

Paula Giddings:

OK.

[cut]

00:02:58:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK, again. Why did you go to Howard? What were you looking for?

Paula Giddings:

I was looking for a community.

Interviewer:

Excuse me, if you could start with, I grew up in Yonkers.

Paula Giddings:

Oh, so you want to do it all over again?

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Paula Giddings:

But compress it?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paula Giddings:

OK. Well, ask me the question again.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:03:17:00

Paula Giddings:

All right.

00:03:18:00

Interviewer:

Why did you go to Howard, and what were you looking for?

00:03:21:00

Paula Giddings:

Well, I grew up in Yonkers, New York in a predominantly White neighborhood feeling very isolated for, for many reasons. And I really wanted to go to a place where there was a like minded Black community. And I thought Howard would be that place. I had been very affected, I think, growing up by so much that was going on around me, particularly those Freedom Rides in 1961 that made me ask a lot of questions and made me curious to find out so much more and so many things that I certainly wasn't getting in my own school and my own experience in Yonkers. So, Howard, I was determined to, to go to Howard in '65.

00:04:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. And when you got there, can you remember one—you had mentioned Arthur Davis, for example. What, what really give you a sense of Blackness there?

00:04:11:00

Paula Giddings:

I was surprised when I first went to Howards. I mean, I expected it to be embroiled in this political ferment 'cause so much had happened, of course, by 1965. That was not true for the most part. But there were some very important people that I met, students and professors, who were very involved in all things going on, the things I was interested in. Tony Gittens certainly was one who I worked with on the newspaper as, as a freshman who taught me a great deal. Adrienne Manns was another one. And I had classes like Arthur Davis' class. And I think it was called then Negro Literature. But it was the very first time that I had read in a systematic way Black literature and Black writers. And Arthur was absolutely wonderful because he also knew so many of those writers. He had been involved in the renaissance during the '20s and had all kinds of stories. He was a wonderful teacher. And it opened up a whole new world for me. So, that was a very, very important experience and certainly is one when I look back which had a great deal to do with my, with the path that I took afterwards.

00:05:16:00

Interviewer:

Did you find that that was generally true? What else, what were you missing in terms of what you were looking for at Howard?

00:05:23:00

Paula Giddings:

Howard had not caught up with the movement. And I'm even talking about even in terms of its curriculum. We were still, a lot of things we weren't able to study. There were efforts to get to be able to study jazz for example. It was not considered a traditional discipline. It

wasn't considered a legitimate [car horn] one at Howard at that time. Now, we're about the mid-sixties. I remember very [car horn] clearly a course in literary criticism. And this was a period when we were still studying the, so the modernist movement, what was happening. Cleanth Brooks and all those kinds of people. And of course that movement was very, very abstract and very, very intellectual and sophisticated, and very, very White. And there was nothing in there that spoke to me. And I remember rebelling against it. Thank goodness there was a class like Arthur Davis' class who talked about the writers who were dealing with the folk tradition, who talked about Langston Hughes, for example, who despite writing during that modernist period refused to acquiesce to all of that and was still writing for Black people.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Paula Giddings:

—So, there was at least that balance. But for the most part, none of my courses ex—

00:06:33:00

Interviewer:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #1:

I have to change sound.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #2081]

[sound roll #237]

00:06:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Sound two, three, seven.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, Paula, tell me why you had problems with freshman assembly.

00:06:47:00

Paula Giddings:

Well, [clears throat] freshman assembly was one of those programs that all freshman were supposed to, had to go to. We didn't have any choice. [clears throat] And they always dragged in these speakers or some kind of cultural program that, again, seemed very, very irrelevant to us. You know, the, the mission, the traditional mission of Black schools has been not only to educate Blacks but to sort of acculturate them and socialize them for the wider industrial order. And those programs symbolize that. So, here you would have to drag into these, to this freshman assembly, hear someone give us a very Booker T. Washington kind of talk, from slavery kind of talk. And they were, they were dull, and they were offensive in many ways.

00:07:34:00

Interviewer:

How were they offensive?

Paula Giddings:

Well, [clears throat] because it—

Interviewer:

Could you—

Paula Giddings:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—say, The assembly was offensive.

Paula Giddings:

The—can I blow my nose?

Interviewer:

Yeah. [laughs]

00:07:41:00

Paula Giddings:

[laughs]

[cut]

00:07:42:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:07:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. Why did you find the freshman assembly so, so offensive?

00:07:49:00

Paula Giddings:

Well, here we were for the most part, here we were in the, in the middle of the civil rights movement. So many important things were happening all around us. Nothing was being explained in terms of the curriculum of Howard University. Nothing was being talked about. It was business as usual going on. And here and in the midst of this were these assemblies that had nothing to do with what was going on. I mean, this was a period of tremendous ferment, ferment. Things were changing all the time, all the time. And we would walk in and hear someone talk about how to dress, how to speak properly, how to fit into some other kind of occupation or job that had nothing to do with Black people or helping Black people out except maybe a wage. So, it was a very—we, we found that, most of us found it very, very offensive. And it wasn't the kind of education—in my generation particularly in those earlier, too, in this period of time, I mean, we went partly to get some kind of intellectualized

experience of what was happening in terms of the arts, in terms of, of literature, in terms of social sciences, of political sciences, et cetera, et cetera. We might not have [clears throat] understood it so clearly of what, what we were looking for and searching for, but we knew freshman assembly and the rest of those things weren't it.

00:09:05:00

Interviewer:

Talk about the Black consciousness movement. And since—

Paula Giddings:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—that happened in the arts, did it have some impact on the students at Howard?

00:09:12:00

Paula Giddings:

I think so. At first in the beginning—

Interviewer:

[inaudible] my question.

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #1:

Hold it.

Paula Giddings:

I'm sorry.

00:09:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

All—

[cut]

00:09:19:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, how did this growing Black consciousness movement begin to be reflected in the literary magazine, for example?

Paula Giddings:

Well, I remember in 1966, I began to edit—'66, '67 is the year I began to edit the literary magazine. And I inherited the magazine called *The Promethean*, named after the god, Greek god of fire. And the work in it was, it was—some very important work in it. We had also essays and poems from professors like—

Interviewer:

If you could just start over.

00:09:53:00

Paula Giddings:

OK. OK. Would you ask the question again?

00:09:56:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. How did the growing Black consciousness movement begin to be reflected in the literary magazine at Howard?

00:10:01:00

Paula Giddings:

I was the editor of the literary magazine in 1966, '67. And I inherited a magazine called *The Promethean*, named after the Greek god of fire. And there were some very good things in *The Promethean*, but it was not yet reflective of the racial militancy that was happening. Remember '66 is Black power. '67, we're talking about separation. And, but in '66, there is some very important work in it. Sterling Brown, for example, his poem, Confessions of Nat Turner—"Remembering Nat Turner" it was called. Arthur Davis had a piece in it, and some other people did. We had a print of Henry O. Tanner in it, which is kind of benign, of course, a fine artist. By '67, you saw the changes. By '67, we called it *The Afro-American Review*. And I remember the—in, introduction by the president of the Liberal Arts Student Council, who was Lewis Myers, who talked about the liberation struggle. And this is really a stark contrast just to the year before—who talked about the role of writers now in that struggle. And this was something rather new that we were all beginning to talk about. Certainly in 1967, it was a very important year in that that was the year of the famous Fisk writers' conference that really launches the new Black poetry movement as a movement. At that conference were the people they called the Young Turk-Turks like Nikki Giovanni, who was then a, a student at Fisk. Sonia Sanchez come to that meeting. Haki Madhubuti, then Don L. Lee, come to the meeting. And there were also older writers like Gwen Brooks, and Margaret Walker, and Dudley Randall. And what had happened was a, kind of a passing of the torch in certain ways, of the younger people demanding that the role of writers be different and that their poetry was different. I remember Gwen Brooks' later on writing that she felt like a Negro being coldly respected at that conference. Haki in fact created Third World Press in that same year.
00:12:12:00

Interviewer:

We're not gonna be able use this.

Paula Giddings:

OK. That's too much?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paula Giddings:

All right.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paula Giddings:

All right.

00:12:16:00

Interviewer:

I, I need to know—

[cut]

00:12:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

[inaudible]

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm. Now, where are we starting from?

Interviewer:

Yeah, we'll start from if you could—I'm sorry, keep going. Compress the story. Just talk about it. Who was there, and then how it affected you, and bringing it back to—

Paula Giddings:

So, we're gonna start with the writers' conference?

Interviewer:

Yes, that's right.

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

00:12:34:00

OK. Talk about the writers' conference and how it affected you personally? And then how you brought it back to Howard.

00:12:39:00

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm. In 1967, all of us at Howard were very much influenced by a very important writers' conference that was organized by John Killens at Fisk University in which people like Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti spoke. They had recently been published by Dudley Randall, who then owned Broadside Press. And that was part of the, this whole Black power movement was reflected in that conference. That was—had a great affect on, on us and on the writing at Howard, the students at Howard, and the literary magazine, now the *Afro-American Review*. We looked at the role of writers very differently. You know, until the late '60s, writ—Black writers for the most part, even though they were very good and racially conscious for the most part wrote for White people and White audiences. The role now was changing of what the function of the Black writer was, and so did the material itself. So, by the time we had something called the *Afro-American Review*, there was a great deal of ana—political analysis, of, of Black politics, of Black poetry and exclamation points, and bold face, and a very different sensibility in the magazine.

00:13:50:00

Interviewer:

How did it affect you personally?

Paula Giddings:

Well, you, again, you just felt that there was—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, say, I felt.

00:13:56:00

Paula Giddings:

I had a tremendous sense first of all and to be honest with you, I don't know how much I analyzed it then, but you had an idea that things were opening up, that there was something very new that, there was a new sense of pride certainly, a new interest in Black cultural roots. And certainly a new idea about—remember this is also the period when people were commemorating Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965. The first person—and we were all affected by, by confronting the situation. Not just acquiescing to it and being the good Negro that the, the freshman assembly asked you to be but confronting a lot of these things,

ex-expressing anger, expressing not apologizing anymore for talking about Black people exclusively, of trying to understand the culture, understand the politics that would be liberating.

00:15:03:00

Interviewer:

Cut. Good.

00:15:04:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:15:05:00

Camera crew member #1:

[unintelligible]

Paula Giddings:

[inaudible] well, it'll be, this is funnier [unintelligible].

Interviewer:

Yes.

Paula Giddings:

Our homecoming.

Interviewer:

That's right, that's right.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

00:15:09:00

Interviewer:

[coughs] Excuse me. All right. Let's talk about the—Robin Gregory's campaign. What was it usually like on the campaign for homecoming queen, and how was, how was hers different?

00:15:20:00

Paula Giddings:

Well, the traditional homecoming campaign was quite a ritual. Each sorority or fraternity, for example, had their candidates. And other organizations had candidates as well. And I remember that during the, the days of the campaign, each candidate would appear on campus at certain times of the day, of the afternoon. And this meant the people, all the candidates of course had to get new wardrobes or people had the latest fashions. They'd usually come rolling in on a, in a car, latest model convertible. And everything was color coordinated. And I remember working on the campaign, you always had to think of what color was the car, then the dress had to match the car, and, and the flowers had to match the dress that matched the car. So, it was all very elaborate. And then there would be a demonstration around talking about the, the candidate. Most of the, the women were certainly by western standards, I mean, the most attractive woman was selected. This didn't always mean that they were light skinned women with straight hair in that traditional western sense. But they were all very, very attractive in a traditional way. And I'll never forget the year, none of us will forget the year that Robin Gregory was also running for homecoming queen. And of course Robin Gregory had no car or—and always looked sharp but certainly not those elaborate dresses. ***She had an afro, which of course was the, was the statement that she made physically.*** And she was always flanked by two very handsome men, very serious, very well dressed in the way that the Fruit of Is-Islam was dressed with the bowties, very serious. And they always had their arms folded and would look straight ahead while Robin talked. ***And Robin talked about the movement. Robin talked about Black politics. Robin was not the traditional homecoming queen candidate.*** She would also go around to the dorms in the evenings, which was something very, very different, and still talking about this. People were, were, by that time were prepared, much more prepared, I think. We, I know—

00:17:34:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Can you say how you were affected?

Paula Giddings:

Oh, OK. All right.

Camera crew member #2

We have to change rolls.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:17:38:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, that's a roll, rollout on twenty, eighty-one.

[cut]

[camera roll #2082]

00:17:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

Continuation of sound roll two, three, seven.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:17:50:00

Interviewer:

OK, what impact did the campaign of Robin Gregory have on you personally?

Paula Giddings:

I remember being very excited about her campaign—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, if you can Robin Gregory.

00:18:00:00

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm. I remember being very excited about Robin Gregory's campaign. I had always felt that there was something wrong with that, the other kind of, of, of traditional ritual that was going on. But at the same time, I had divided loyalties because I was a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and we had our own candidate. It was a very good friend of mine and who I worked on the campaign with. So, we had these, and many of us had these, these feelings back and forth. But all of us with divided loyalties or not felt very excited about, about Robin's campaign and about what it symbolized not just in terms of politics but what it meant in terms of what women should be doing as well, the role of women. It was very, very important to us.

00:18:45:00

Interviewer:

Would you just talk a little bit about that?

00:18:46:00

Paula Giddings:

Well, Howard had been—I remember this being confronted with the kind of situation where men, when you passed by men, especially as an underclassman, as a freshman, sophomore, they would actually give you a grade. I mean, to your, you know, they would talk among themselves and say, Well, that's an A. Well, that's a B. There was a lack of respect in, in, in lots of instances. And there was a, a, a terrible degrading sense ab-about all of that. And what Robin did was not only in terms, again, of race, but also talking about the role of women and what they should be doing and talking about, and being taken very, very seriously. Not just, not because of any physical attributes but because of her mind. And this, I, I think, was as important as, as the racial aspect of her campaign.

00:19:40:00

Interviewer:

Fantastic. Now, if you could talk also about the crowning. What was it like? You're sitting in the assembly. Again, personally. And the, the homecoming queen is about to be announced. What is it like? Set the stage as if we have no film.

00:19:53:00

Paula Giddings:

I remember very much the, the evening when the homecoming queen was crowned. And I was in the Cramton Auditorium, which was filled to the hilt. For the last time, all the candidates were announced and went up on, on the stage in the auditorium. And the way that the, the whole evening was set was very, very dramatic. What would happen after that is that

the lights went down, and all of the candidates went behind the curtain at the back of the stage. The ballot was absolutely secret balloting, so no one in the auditorium knew who was going to win. And the idea was that there was a cr—there was a throne, a high backed thrown with, with its back to the audience behind the curtain. And there was a revolving stage. So, whoever would win, whoever won, would win would sit on that throne and then slowly revolve towards the audience. ***The lights went down. The candidates went back. Then you heard the, the curtains open. And you heard the crank of the revolving*** [car horn] ***stage begin. And as the, the stage revolved and turned around towards the audience, the lights began to come up at the same time. Well, before you saw Robin, you saw the way that the lights hit, cast a silhouette on the curtains, and you saw the silhouette of her afro before you saw her. Well, the auditorium exploded. And everybody exploded. It was, it was a wonderful moment. People started jumping up, and screaming, and some were raising their fists. Then spontaneously a chant began. The chant was, "Ungawa! Black power! Ungawa! Black power!" And a chain was created. People started to, to march to it, to the, to the rhythm of, "Ungawa! Black power!" And there was a line that went all the way around the auditorium, and more and more people joined the line. I did, too, as it, as it went around the auditorium. And finally out the door and into the streets of Washington DC. Past the campus and, and still chanting, "Ungawa! Black power!" And that was really the launching of that movement at Howard.***

00:22:13:00

Interviewer:
Cut. Oh!

[cut]

[slate]

00:22:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, if you can talk about the takeover has now happened, and you have come, come into the administration building for the first time. What is it like going into the, into the administration building?

00:22:28:00

Paula Giddings:

I remember walking into the administration building for the first time after the takeover, and the excite—obviously there was a great deal of excitement in the air. But more than that, I was so impressed by the things, how things were operating there and structured there. For example, students had taken over the switchboard, and it was running more efficiently than it

ever had under the admin-administration. There was a microphone right in the front on that first large floor where there were announcements being made. Of course you had to have ID to get in and out, and that was very carefully monitored. There were separate floors for men [truck drives by]—

00:23:05:00

Camera crew member #1:

Cut. I've got—

[cut]

[slate]

00:23:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, so describe what you see when you first go into the a—into the administration building.

00:23:14:00

Paula Giddings:

When I first went into the, the first day I went to the administration building after the takeover was, was really something. I'll, I'll never forget it. It was very, very well organized. It was one of the most organized movements I have seen even since. You had to have ID, of course, to get in and out. So, only students really were allowed or those people knew were allowed in. You walked into the administration building. The switchboard now was taken over by students and was running much more efficiently than it ever had before. There was a microphone set up in the front where there were announcements being made, and different student representatives had different things to say. And so everyone would hear it. There was, a whole sound system, so everyone could hear what was happening. There was separate floors for men and women, for people who were, who were spending the night, sleeping over, or who wanted to change clothes, et cetera. So, they had one floor for women and one floor for men up in the upper floors. We had the best meals. Of course every school cafeteria, and Howard was no exception, had the worst meals in the world. But a lot of restaurateurs and others in the city were sympathetic to the takeover of Howard, so we would get these wonderful turkey, whole turkeys were coming in. People were eating three meals a day there and delicious food. There were, there were times, specified times when there would be a cleanup time, and people were assigned to mop the floors and keep everything straight and clean. So, it was run, it was running very, very efficiently. And that whole sense of, I guess I, that's when I really consciously knew I had found that Black community [truck drives by] that I had been searching for. 'Cause you were sitting there in the administration building. All of us certainly were very excited about what we had done. Very, very serious though about

what we had done. The proposals and all were very thought out of what we wanted the school to do and the administration to do, and what kind of courses that we wanted. And felt very committed to carrying it through and felt very good about ourselves as well. I guess it was a, a kind of rite of passage into adulthood, adulthood in a way as well.

00:25:23:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the cultural things that were on.

Paula Giddings:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

You mentioned the, the gospel singers who were, and it was the first time they could be on campus. And, and maybe some of the things that were going on within the a-administration building.

00:25:32:00

Paula Giddings:

So many things were now able to be, be expressed that we couldn't express before. Howard never liked gospel music, offici—in the official way. And I remember a group of, of—

00:25:45:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. If you could say that again but tell me why.

Paula Giddings:

[coughs] Gospel mus—where do we start from?

Interviewer:

Again.

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Sorry.

Paula Giddings:

What was the question?

Interviewer:

Let's cut for a second.

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #2:

Howard never—no, no, keep going.

00:25:58:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, OK. Howard never allo—liked gospel music.

00:26:01:00

Paula Giddings:

Howard officially as with jazz didn't like gospel music. It wasn't considered legitimate music. It was improper music. It wasn't the kind of thing that they thought that they should be, be teaching or allowing their young colored students to, to have. And so I remember those, the great feeling of freedom [car horn] during this period. There was a group of young women who would sing gospel sings. Who would walk around the campus and perhaps pose at a tree and begin singing this wonderful, wonderful music. I remember in the fine arts building, there had been this large portrait of a ballerina, of a White ballerina in one of those positions, those dance positions. And someone had written beneath it, Wake up and live. You know? [laughs] It was that whole, it was that entire sense of things that, that had changed. We had, we had created a sea change in that university.

00:27:00:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

00:27:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:27:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:27:05:00

Interviewer:

How did, how did this takeover change you personally?

Paula Giddings:

Well, in lots of ways. Certainly one of the things—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Paula Giddings:

Oh, the change over, the—not the change over. What is it called?

Interviewer:

Takeover.

Camera crew member #1:

Takeover.

00:27:17:00

Paula Giddings:

The takeover.

00:27:18:00

Interviewer:

Start, start again.

00:27:20:00

Paula Giddings:

Mm-hmm. The takeover and the other, and the activities of Howard around that time did have a, a great deal of impact on me. I guess one of the most immediate was I got an afro. And I always had very thick hair, and so I had a, a rather large afro. I always remember coming home that first time with an afro, and my mother, who tends not [car horn] to be emotional just sat down and cried bitter tears about [laughs] what, what I had done. 'Cause I also had the large beaded earrings and the fake fur coat and boots. Oh, it was, it was something. She was shocked. And it was true with the rest of my friends as well who went home. We all traded stories later of what the, of what, what happened when we went home [laughs] and the reaction. But the most important thing was what, how it had affected certainly my thinking and what I wanted to do when I grew up. Certainly that whole concept of the role of the writer that we talked a great deal about in terms of the literary magazine had a lasting impact on me, I think, and in, in my career. Certainly I felt a much better sense of self. I was not, I was reared in a way that I always had a good sense of self. But again that there are these questions that were always nagging—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Paula Giddings:

—at me. And many of them were answered. I thought I had more answers than I actually had. But at least in that, that phase of my development, I felt that I had learned a great deal about myself. I was certainly very, very political, very, very militant in, in that sense. And it was that militancy and perspective I brought to Random House where, my first job after school in a, in a publishing house. And that's a story to itself.

00:29:13:00

Interviewer:

Cut. That's fine.

[cut]

[camera roll #2082]

00:29:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

Continuation of interview.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:29:19:00

Interviewer:

What affect did the takeover and all this ferment of activity have on you?

00:29:24:00

Paula Giddings:

The takeover and the four years of activity of, of Howard had a tremendous impact on me. I guess the most obvious and the first thing that comes to mind was that I got an afro. I went with straightened hair and come out with an afro. And I'll never forget the, the first time I went home to see my mother, who was, is not an emotional woman and is a very cool and collected woman. But when I opened the door, and she saw my afro, along with the beaded earrings, and the fake fur coat, and the, and the, and the pants, she, the poor woman just broke down and cried. I remember her sitting at that dinning room table, and just put her head down, and cried very bitter tears. A number of my friends, of course were, I remember us trading reactions when we—number of had gotten afros and gone home—when we came back to school. One of my friends said that her mother thought that next she would probably be on dope [laughs] since she had gotten an afro. That was the next st—that was the only logical thing where she would go over that. So, that happened. But more importantly, I, I, got a new sense of self, a new sense of my Black self, of, in terms of our, our, in terms of culture, in terms of politics, in terms of the right to demand certain things, the right to feel good about yourself. And I had always had a, a good sense of myself but not necessarily a clear sense of myself as a Black person. And I think that was the important thing, and it's something I am sure I was searching for now that I think about it, when I talked about that search. And certainly I found it at, at Howard. Certainly as a person who was always interested in writing, all of the debates and all of the, the, the editing, and the selection of work about the—when the new poetry movement and all of that was going on, certainly the idea of what the role of a

writer should be was formed at Howard. What good literature should be in Arthur Davis' class, of which I learned was formed at Howard. And that certainly stayed me. I mean, certainly that is a very important legacy that stayed with me throughout my career.

00:31:35:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut please.

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

[cut]

[slate]

00:31:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, talk about Robin Gregory's coronation and, as homecoming queen. And being in that audience, what was it like?

00:31:49:00

Paula Giddings:

I remember being in Cramton Auditorium the evening that the homecoming queen was elected and coroneted. And the place of course was filled to capacity, and there was tremendous excitement in the room. I remember very prec—[groans] oh, God.

00:32:05:00

Interviewer:

Start

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Paula Giddings:

All right.

00:32:08:00

Interviewer:

Start again.

[Crosstalk]

00:32:09:00
Paula Giddings:

Start all—

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paula Giddings:

—over again? OK. I remember being at Cramton Auditorium the evening that the homecoming queen was coroneted. It was filled to capacity. It was the event of the season after all. And ever—there was excitement in the room. I remember all the candidates going up front for the last time and then going toward, toward the back of the stage. And how it worked was, of course there was an absolutely secret ballot of who would win. And [car horn] we would not know until we would see the winning homecoming queen sit in a throne on the stage. And it was a revolving stage, so the back of the throne was to the audience. And the stage would slowly re-revolve—

00:32:55:00

Interviewer:

Cut just a second.

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

Interviewer:

I'll tell you what I need.

[cut]

[slate]

00:33:00:00

Interviewer:

OK, you're in Cramton Auditorium. It's homecoming night. What's happening?

00:33:03:00

Paula Giddings:

I remember being in Cramton Auditorium the evening that the homecoming queen would be coroneted. And of course the place was filled to capacity. After all, it was the event of the season. And there was electricity in the air. And I'll never forget that moment. That moment when the homecoming queen, the one who was e-e-elected. And of course it was a secret ballot, so no one knew who it was. And she would sit, she sat in the high back throne, which was [ambulance drives by]—the back was—

Interviewer:

Hold it.

Camera crew member:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[slate]

00:33:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, you're in Cramton Auditorium, and it's electric. What's happening?

00:33:42:00

Paula Giddings:

I remember being in Cramton Auditorium the evening of the homecoming queen coronation. And of course the auditorium was filled to capacity. I mean, after all it was the event of the season. And there was electricity in the air. And I'll never forget the moment when we knew who the homecoming queen was going to be. It had been a secret ballot, of course, so no one knew beforehand. But what we all saw on the stage was the throne, high backed throne, and the homecoming queen sat in the throne on top of a revolving stage that would re-revolve

slowly toward the audience. When the queen was seated in the throne, the [car horn] lights went down. Still no one knew who it was. And as it began, the stage began to revolve, the lights began to come up slowly. And what we was saw even before we saw Robin's face was the silhouette of her afro. And it was, everyone just stood up and screamed. I'll never forget that moment. And they began spontaneously to sh, to shout and chant, "Ungawa! Black power! Ungawa! Black power!" And finally a line was started where people would march to the rhythm of "Ungawa! Black power!" And move all around Cramton Auditorium. There was, there was a line that people would join as it went, as it circled around. And I joined it, too. And we finally circled all the way around then out the door and across the campus and into Washington DC.

00:35:14:00

Interviewer:

Perfect. Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

OK, I'm running out of tape.

Camera crew member #2:

OK. OK.

Paula Giddings:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

Lovely.

Camera crew member #1:

Is that a wrap on this or [unintelligible]?

Interviewer:

Oh, hopefully. Yes.

Paula Giddings:

[coughs] OK.

Interviewer:

You made it through.

Paula Giddings:

Oh, good.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Paula Giddings:

Good.

Interviewer:

Yes.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:35:27:00