

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**MICHAEL J. BERRY II**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of Interviews  
Conducted by

Karen A. Frenkel

at

Princeton University  
Princeton, New Jersey

on

4 and 5 December 2007

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)



Michael J. Berry II

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## Michael J. Berry II

### Education

1989 B.S., Physics, Minor in Philosophy, University of California  
at Berkeley  
1991 A.M., Physics, Harvard University  
1994 Ph.D., Physics, Harvard University  
1994 Neural Systems and Behavior, Marine Biological Laboratory,  
Woods Hole

### Professional Experience

1987, 1988 Exxon Production Research  
Research Assistant

1989-1994 Harvard University  
Doctoral Researcher  
1994-1999 Post-Doctoral Researcher, Laboratory of Markus Meister

1999-2005 Princeton University  
Assistant Professor, Department of Molecular Biology  
2005 - present Associate Professor, Department of Molecular Biology

### Honors

1989 Phi Beta Kappa, UC Berkeley  
1989-1992 National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow  
1996-1999 National Eye Institute Postdoctoral Grant  
2000-2001 Fellow-at-Large, Sante Fe Institute  
2000-2003 Research Grant from the E. Matilda Ziegler Foundation for the Blind  
2000-2004 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences  
2001-2003 Old Dominion Faculty Fellow, Princeton University, Humanities Council

## ABSTRACT

**Michael J. Berry II** begins his oral history discussing his childhood, which was heavily influenced by the chemistry careers of both his parents and involved several moves from California to Wisconsin, New Jersey, and then Texas. During high school Berry developed an interest in both physics and chemistry, while also engaging in some philosophical questions. Shortly after matriculating at the University of California, Berkeley, Berry decided to pursue physics as his major instead of chemistry. The questions at the heart of physics seemed both more intellectually stimulating and intriguing. Although Berry felt he had a calling within the field of physics, he still found time to wrestle with philosophical inquiry. As an undergraduate Berry began to think about neuroscience as the melding of his two interests: physics and philosophy. After earning his bachelors degree, however, Berry pursued a Ph.D. in physics at Harvard University under Robert M. Westervelt. While finishing his thesis work on semiconductor physics and chaotic systems, Berry decided to pursue post-doctoral research that led him farther from physics and closer to biology. Prior to beginning his post-doctoral work, Berry enrolled in a Marine Biological Laboratory course at Woods Hole focused on electrophysiology and found a community of physicists working in neuroscience and the biological fields. As such, the time spent with Markus Meister at Harvard University for post-doctoral research allowed Berry to transition successfully into the field of neuroscience (which he found better suited to his intellectual needs). By focusing his research on visual processing in the retina, Berry discovered the joys and challenges of working in a field that, unlike physics, did not yet have what he considered a well-defined framework. Before securing his faculty position at Princeton University in the Molecular Biology Department, Berry encountered some difficulty in choosing between physics-based and biology-based departments. Shortly after starting at Princeton, Berry was awarded the Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences award. Throughout his oral history, Berry addressed such important issues as funding, mentoring his students, and attempting to balance his personal life with his career. The oral history concludes with a discussion of the connections between neuroscience and philosophy and the globalization of science.

**Karen A. Frenkel** is a writer, documentary producer, and author specializing in science and technology and their impacts on society. She wrote *Robots: Machines in Man's Image* (Harmony 1985) with Isaac Asimov. Her articles have appeared in many magazines and newspapers including *The New York Times*, *CyberTimes*, *Business Week*, *Communications Magazine*, *Discover*, *Forbes*, *New Media*, *Personal Computing*, *Scientific American*, *Scientific American MIND*, *The Village Voice*, and *Technology Review*. Ms. Frenkel's award-winning documentary films, *Net Learning* and *Minerva's Machine: Women and Computing* aired on Public Television. She has been an interviewer for Columbia University's Oral History Research Center's 9/11 Narrative and Memory project, The National Press Foundation's Oral History of Women in Journalism, and the International Psychoanalytic Institute for Training and Research's Oral History. Professional memberships include: The Authors Guild, National Association of Science Writers, Writer's Guild of America East, and New York Women in Film

and Television: Past Member of the Board and Director of Programming. Her website is [www.Karenafrenkel.com](http://www.Karenafrenkel.com)



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