

Feminist Oral Histories of the University of Washington

Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies, University of Washington
Seattle, WA

Dr. Regina Yung Lee

Interviewed by
Valerie J. Bloem

18 April 18, 2019
Padelford B-110-D, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Narrator

Dr. Regina Yung Lee is a lecturer in Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Riverside. Her research addresses experimental and speculative futurities at the intersections of feminist theory, speculative fiction, world literatures, and the biological sciences. She is also interested in gender, labor, and affect in transnational participatory online cultures, mediumship as gendered contemporary corporeality, and the refiguration of Suvin's novum in biological and informational terms.

Interviewer

Valerie J Bloem is an undergrad student at the University of Washington. She started as a Microbiology major but switched to Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies as a major after three years.

Abstract

In this oral history Dr. Regina Yung Lee talks about being born and raised in Canada where she studied to become a Marine Ecologist. When her studies led her to move to California for a while, she was introduced to Gender Women and Sexuality Studies classes which shifted her interest. She taught K12, high school and eventually ended up as a lecturer in the University of Washington. Dr. Lee explains how she deals with discrimination and/or inequality that happens to her and her favourite publication. She concludes by tying her Marine Ecology studies to her current social and humanitarian studies.

Interview recorded by Valerie Bloem on Sony CX580V one 35-minute tape which has been split into two parts.

Files

Audio: Dr Lee B110D 18 April 09.15am Audio.wma

Video: Dr Lee B_110_D 18 April 09.15am Part 1.mpg

Dr Lee B_110_D 18 April 09.15am Part 2.mpg

Transcript – 16 pages

Transcribed by Valerie Bloem 2019.

NOTE: Transcript of video file. Timecodes in transcript relate to audio file. Start and end of video files noted within transcript.

BLOEM: Hi

LEE: Hi

BLOEM: My name is Valerie, I am a GWSS major graduating this spring.

LEE: Congratulations

[00:00:12]

BLOEM: Thank you. The reason why I actually chose you to interview is because I had a, I think GWSS 300 class with you in 2017. And I remember the class before it started, people were talking to each other and the moment you waked in, everybody kind of stopped. And I was kind of...not taken aback but .. kind of.. it was admiring to see that a woman of colour, specifically an Asian woman, had such an impact on a large group of people. Your presence was “there” and...but at the same time you were also very approachable, and I think it’s very hard to walk the line between demanding respect but also have people be comfortable with you to ask questions. So, this is the reason why I picked you, cause I have also always wanted to take more classes with you but unfortunately they just didn’t match my schedule. So that’s really sad. For me.
[laugh]

So let’s go on with the interview. Your name, pronouns and your title?

LEE: My name is Regina Yung Lee, I use she/her pronouns, I am a lecturer in this department.

[00:01:36]

BLOEM: And where are you from and how were you as a child?

LEE: I was born in British Columbia. My family moved to the city of Vancouver

there when I was ... how old was I? Four? So, I basically don't really remember anywhere else. How was I as a child? Quiet... bookish... not terribly interested in like, loud running games although I would play them. My mother has this great story about how if I were offered new clothing or food I would always go for the food. I think I agree with those priorities still.

[00:02:22]

BLOEM: Have you always been interested in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies or in related...anything related topics?

LEE: I think I was perhaps not always interested in the subject or discipline that I didn't know existed and I think that's a fairly common story for a lot of us who enter into the field. But I think I had been aware, since I was a very young child, of differences or disparities in which ways people were treated. And being inquisitive, I wanted to know why, right? Like...well he gets to run around, how come I don't get to run around and yell? And I don't remember any like...single incident... but the accumulated response that I got over a number of years worked out to something like "well, you're a girl, so you can't". And interestingly, now that I think about this, this is a pretty good example of what [Judith] Butler might mean, when she talks about performative variation. Being how one does or learns to do gender.

[00:03:36]

BLOEM: What led to your studies and eventually being a lecturer in this GWSS department of the University of Washington?

LEE: That's going to be a long answer, I hope you're ready [laughter].

BLOEM: That's fine.

LEE: So, I started off as a Biology Major in my undergrad. So, my major was Marine Ecology, I had a minor in literature. And at the time I was planning to

be either a bench or a field scientist and that was the plan. I had no real ambition for a PhD. Because I was like “it takes too long, I just want to get a job”. And so after I graduated, I did work for a bit in the kind of job that I was thinking of and realized “you know, this is ok but I don’t know that if I have a huge future here” and I spoke to people who had chosen the path that I had chosen and actually even they needed PhDs. And they were very clear like, if you want to be, say a lab manager, you need to have this training. And I thought “I’m not sure that I can handle doing a PhD in that discipline”. So, I left the university after that, got my teaching credential so I left and then came back. And then went out to teach K12 for several years. So, I started off teaching middle school, quickly realized that people who teach middle school have a special calling in life and I was not one of them. That’s a very hard job. There are people who are great at it, I just don’t think I’m one of them. And so, I ended up teaching high school for about four years and really liked it. High school literature, social studies, some music – usually guitar, also some orchestra and choir. And then I realized that I was wanting to pick my studies back up, so I decided “well, I’ll go back for one class at my local university where I graduated from and we’ll see how that goes”. And when I came back to campus it was as if coming home after not realizing I’ve been away. So, at that point I finished the course and I realized I’d better take it pretty seriously what’s happening here, or I might be really dissatisfied later. So, I applied to graduate programs, just a few. And I got into a few and chose the one that was closest [laughter] which happened to be the Master of Arts in comparative literature and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Alberta which is one province east. Did my work there and when I got there, by the end of my first year my professors were saying things that were not like “-if- you decide to go on to your PhD” because in Canada the doctorate is actually broken up into getting a Master’s first, usually at one institution, and then a PhD at another institution. And they were making noises like not “if” but “when”. And I believed them, which maybe I shouldn’t have done without asking some questions. If only so that they could tell me honestly what it would be like trying getting a job at the academy that existed now rather than the academy that they remembered when they did their own doctoral work. But in any case, I applied for the PhD and again got into a few places and... pro-tip: go where

they fund you [laughs], that is key. And I was lucky enough to have a grant from my home country as well. So that made it easier to go where I wanted to go. and so, I ended up in, again, comparative literature at the University of California in Riverside where I did my PhD. And that's where I was introduced formally to feminist theory. I had been reading it on my own at the University of Alberta but I've never taken classes in that focus topic so, one of the things that I've gone to the University of California to do was to find mentors and teachers who would show me how to do that work as a scholar and I found them. So, after I finished my degree work there it turns out that the department of what was then Women's Studies at UC Riverside was looking for someone to do some work for them. I applied for the position and got it. And so, from there, because I was already teaching large introductory courses like the one that you took with me, when I applied here to be a lecturer, apparently that was helpful because they hired me. So that's the path.

[00:08:40]

BLOEM: Wow. Is your teaching...is it much different from Alberta and here and California?

LEE: So, just to clarify the question. Are you asking me if the way I teach is different or the same as I was taught?

[00:09:01]

BLOEM: Yes.

LEE: It depends on the class, but for the most part I teach quite differently. Because, as I mentioned I was trained as a teacher. So, a lot of your professors don't always have formal training in education. And so, they don't always necessarily...yeah they just don't have formal training. Obviously, a lot of experience and they know what works but that's different from formal training, which is what I had. And so, It's been very interesting to speak to colleagues and have exchanges of like "how do you teach people about this?"

or “how would you teach a difficult topic?” or “what do you do when this kind of thing happens?”. And to realize that their own responses are pretty much like what they’ve seen and what they’ve learned and then to realize that I actually had the great privilege of being taught how to handle things like that. So, if you were in my 2017 big class then you know that we use things like case studies, and clickers, and think-pair-share, and small group questions, random call. No wait, we were not doing random call at that point. I do it now. And there are some reasons for that, which I can talk about if you want?

BLOEM: Yeah!

LEE: Ok, we’ll come back to that. But I think these were all things that I had tried out the first time I was teaching a really big class. So as a new professor I was learning how to do these things. But they were also things that I had learned how to do when I was being trained to teach middle school. Very similar techniques. And all of these are geared toward keeping students individually engaged to the subject matter through interaction with their peers so that they can better integrate what they’re learning into their own understanding, in their own lives, which is actually a very feminist method of proceeding. But that’s usually not how it’s presented, right? Like the importance of the epistemology of your lived experience is not necessarily prioritized so much in higher education all the time. And I think GWSS is one of the disciplines that privileges that kind of method of knowledge acquisition the most. But interestingly it is something that is very much practiced at the K12 level. So, you asked me to return to random call, why I do it?

So, I was initially very hesitant to adopt this practice, but it was recommended to me by the evidence-based teaching group on campus which is run through the center for teaching and learning here. And it really has this goal of bringing together professors who are interested in learning about pedagogical techniques that have been tested in classrooms and which have been shown to have good effects on student learning. Usually measured through a difference in information retention. What I’m trying to say is they do better on tests. So, Mary Pat Wenderoth and the rest of the research group in Biology have been pioneering a lot of this work and so the EBT, evidence-based teaching groups,

are based on some of what they've done. And random call was one of their techniques and I was initially very dubious because for me as an undergraduate that would've been a living nightmare. I still didn't really enjoy talking to people at that point in my life and yet the research demonstrated that not only did it increase accountability for individual students, it was also reducing instructor bias. So, the unconscious bias that instructors might have in paying more attention to one student or certain kind of student or students who look or act or speak certain ways and perhaps not calling on other students as much, as well as just maintaining as wide a group of voices as possible in any given class. And in the face of that kind of research, which again, has very clear feminist implications for how I run a classroom, I really figured "you know, there's no harm in trying it. And if we all hate, then we hate it". Instead it turned out to be, I think a really effective way of broadening the range of voices who get to speak in any give circumstance in class and I really enjoy it. Which, again, I did not see coming. That's why.

[00:13:47]

BLOEM: Yeah, I'm thinking, if I had to go through that in 2017, I probably would not have liked it, but now in hindsight, it would have given me the opportunity to learn from my peers and to hear other sides of stories. Because usually you always have the same people speaking up when they usually have the same kind of mindset. But if you hear from someone else with a totally different background, it's very enlightening. So, I think it's a really good idea.

LEE: I think I try to sweeten the pot as well by saying: this is the one way you can get extra credit in GWSS 200. Because I think when...with your class there was no way to get extra credit, which in part is because extra credit usually means extra time and then if you have extra time you are a certain kind of student. Not every student has that. But this way, everybody gets that one, at least one chance to get that one extra point.

[00:14:46]

BLOEM: I like it. I remember in the class there was a...one class in particular where

you started off saying a disclaimer that this subject matter was triggering. I think it was, it was very...I mean I started tearing up because of my own experiences. I think it was about violence. And...how do you prepare for a lecture like that? And how do you relieve the stress afterwards?

[00:15:25]

LEE: I think just acknowledging first of all, with the TA's [Teacher's Assistants] that this class can be really difficult and thinking about it as something that we have to scaffold student's experience for before and after helps because at least then people have... including myself right? Everybody has a little early notice like "this is coming up, it's going to be a difficult week, just get ready for that". And part of it is just previous experience. I had taught an entire course on gender and violence at one point and it was a very difficult experience both for myself and the students. And I don't think I had...well I had underestimated how difficult that would be over a ten-week period. And even with the focus on structural, rather than perhaps like, interpersonal violence, it was still very, very difficult to deal with these topics on a bi-weekly basis. So, some of the coping mechanisms that I learned there I kind of import into that week. And one of them is just making sure that if students are having a reaction, they understand what's happening to them and there are safety mechanisms in place so that you know where to go, and that you can talk to somebody around you or that you can leave if you have to. So...yeah.

[00:16:47]

BLOEM: And how do you deal with it afterwards, after like say, when you leave the classroom?

LEE: I usually try to leave space in my day to just process a little bit. And whether that's like, doing a more strenuous work-out or whether that's going for a long walk, something like that. Or it can just actually be something like, avoiding caffeine that day. And so, it's just kind of understanding over the years that teaching about these things or talking about them has, is going to have certain

physical effects. And then trying to adequately leave space for myself to have those things happen and then dealing with it afterwards right? So, I guess a short way to say that would be, I try to account for how it will affect both myself and the class and leave space for that to happen instead of maybe not doing that and ignoring it.

[00:17:59]

BLOEM: Have you...is it the same kind of way that you deal with challenges, as like...in terms of discrimination or inequality to you?

LEE: I think some of that is just trying to figure out exactly where my self-worth comes from. Right? And so, if I depend on external validation entirely for certain kinds of recognition or understanding, then that's going to make life more difficult because it's unlikely to come from those areas. And so, if I recognize that and then just de-couple or delaminate my sense of self from that kind of validation, which is less likely to show up than... yeah is less likely to occur, then I find it has less power to hurt me.

BLOEM: That's so amazing.

LEE: It takes a lot of work. And if folks have the resources to pursue it, I do recommend finding other folks, that kind of doctor, trained counsellors, who have methods for dealing with these things because that can be really useful as a place to begin and it doesn't have to be a big deal right? It can be one consult. But basically, it can shorten the process which is useful.

[00:19:34]

BLOEM: How different is your reaction now, as opposed to maybe in high school or college, as a woman of colour, have you dealt with immediate discrimination or inequality?

LEE: Almost certainly. Because of my specific positionality a lot of that has been

structural rather than interpersonal, so not necessarily people yelling things at me but perhaps just being oppressed in very specific ways, the way the system is set up. I think in high school I was livid about it all the time. It was very tiring. And now that I'm older and more tired [laugh] I think understanding that a lot of this has a history and is built into certain structures that run my life, it doesn't make it ok, but I think just knowing that that is something I'm not the only person to struggle with is helpful. Because this also encourages me to find other people who have figured out how to survive. I'm not the first, I won't be the last woman of colour in the academy. So just figuring out like, how have these people done it, how might I adapt their strategies for my own circumstances and then seeing whether or not that works can be helpful. I think the mentors that I have had, and there have been several, have been really instrumental in helping me figure out how to navigate things like that.

[00:21:22]

BLOEM: That's amazing. It kind of made me think of my own experiences and how I used to deal with it and how I deal with it now. It is the same, like if you understand that it's not only you, it helps a lot.

LEE: Yeah, yup. Cause then you don't have to walk around thinking "why is everyone else crazy cause they don't see it? Oh, maybe I'm the crazy one because nobody else seems to have this problem?" But no, a lot of people have this problem.

[00:21:52]

BLOEM: Right. I want to go back to your work because I went over your CV and it's very impressive and very lengthy. It's amazing. You also have very different topics of publications, which I now understand was because you use to do Biology?

LEE: Mmhm, Marine Ecology.

[00:22:17]

BLOEM: Marine Ecology, sorry. What publication stands out and was the most fun to do and why?

LEE: Oh...most fun....it's a very interesting metric for me to apply to publication writing because I just submitted an edited manuscript, yeah an edited collection manuscript and I am very tired from that and that wasn't fun but I'm really glad we did it, which is mostly how I feel about that. [laughs]
I think the one that stands out the most to me is probably the 2014 publication on Korean popular culture fandoms, so this is anglophone fandom around K-drama which happens in Korean and I was tracking how it was being, I guess catalysed and centralized thru a specific website called Dramabeans. And that one was just an interesting experience in a number of ways and part of it was when I wrote the original talk that became that chapter, I had no expectations of that every being anything other than a single workshop paper. Ever. I was a grad student in the middle of my program and had been asked to submit something for this workshop by someone who was not on my dissertation committee and I was like "well sure, that sounds like it could be fun, let's see what happens". And when I went, again, I had no expectation of anything coming out of it except this great experience. And instead that one publication actually led me into contact with some scholars, one of whom I'm still in contact with today, Michelle Cho, and she has...is in the middle of her emerging as one of the major thinkers about things like platform studies in Korean pop culture, Asian pop culture alongside people like Mark Steinberg who are much more well-established right now. But it was interesting to be in the room with a whole bunch of people who were thinking about popular culture in a transnational perspective, some from the Koreanist perspective area studies that is very different from my approach which is comparative literature. And seeing that they were all focused around something that I was really invested in because I thought it was fun and understanding that actually my deep investment in that work had potential, I guess, scholarly applications. And so that was also that piece was also my first introduction to the entire

process of publication from beginning to end and understanding that it took like several years and had to pass through multiple reviews, I had to revise multiple times, there were lots of things that needed to be added in, some things that needed to be taken out or better contextualized and explained. It made me a better writer. Not that quickly but a better writer. It made me a better thinker and it exposed me to, for the first time, to like the massive undertaking that an academic publication is because congruent alongside all of the other work that I was telling you about earlier, I had also been involved in a little bit of journalism and some like, media publication stuff. So, I edited for a magazine called Ricepaper for several years, which had national distribution, but which was not an academic publication necessarily although we did have several academic pieces come in. And so just understanding the time scale and the amount of reading in that particular case that was required, the amount of revising really helped me understand what publication in the academy was about, what it was for and I found myself fascinated by it even though sometimes it was very frustrating. And I think I am still proud of the final product although knowing that it is getting taught in places where I don't expect to see it, like every now and then someone will come up and say "oh we read this in our class" and I'm like "oh that's great actually, I'm really glad, I hope it was useful". So, I think I like that particular publication for all the things it taught me. And like I said, I still like the work that I did there.

[00:27:08]

BLOEM: That's amazing. Is there ... it's a totally different direction now. Is there anybody that you look up to?

LEE: Sure, there are lots of people. as I said, I have professional mentors, both during my dissertation writing time and now who help me contextualize some of what's happening, I guess. And these have ranged from colleagues to people kind of outside in the world. Probably one of my, like...the hero I've had the longest would be somebody who was friends with my mother when she first came to

this country as a student. And this person was my mother's house-mother basically. And was helping her kind of figure out American life and culture, dealing with the culture shock, maybe get some actually homecooked food every once in a while, even though that food was very, very different, and that was part of the culture shock. And my mother really relied on her, especially when I was young and so I grew up thinking about her kind of like a member of my own family and she rode motorcycles across the United States and is a registered nurse and was working with her religious organization to do disaster relief around the country and was doing so well into her sixties and seventies. Just because she thought the work was important and you know someone like that who doesn't really fit into any of the neat boxes we have for who she is or who she might be, I'm proud to claim her as an early influence.

[00:29:04]

BLOEM: Yeah. I'm going conclude this interview with maybe one more question? Do you have any hobbies or quirks that students may find surprising about you and that you're willing to share?

LEE: Hobbies would imply doing things for fun. [laughs] I guess my fandom studies, students probably already know this, I do watch a lot of television that was not produced in this country. And so, when I think of relaxing in front of the tv, it's usually relaxing in front of the tv watching something with subtitles. That's probably a little strange. Um . . . I'm trying to think of like a

[End: Dr Lee B_110_D 18 April 09.15 Part 1 Video.mp4]

[Video: Dr Lee B_110_D 18 April 09.15 Part 2 Video.mp4]

LEE: quirk that would be interesting. I don't have interesting quirks [laughs]. But I guess perhaps one of the things I can do to kind of tie the whole thing together would be to point out that every now and then I have to go to the sea. Because I have to see the creatures that live there and when I see the creatures that live there, I try to give them their scientific names to see if I can still do it. And for some of the algae and some of the invertebrates that live in the intertidal zone,

which is what I studied, I still can. So, I guess pay attention in school, you never know what you might use to relax later.

[laughter]

[00:00:34]

BLOEM: Do you still get creeped out by any animals, since you know so much about it, I would assume not? But maybe like .. some ... are there any....

LEE: I'm not a fan of spiders, even though I know that they perform very useful things. And even though most of the ones that we see are...are like house and garden spiders and they're really why we don't get overrun by other insects. But there's something about that shape and I think part of it is because I was trained in California for several years to identify things like Black Widows. So, I don't kill them, I take them outside, but it's still a little scary trying to deal with that. I think the thing with the natural world is that fear is sometimes the appropriate response. Does that make sense?

BLOEM: Yeah.

LEE: Like you are not supposed to look at an apex predator, whether it's a grizzly bear or shark [excerpt] and not be a little bit scared of them? Because that's what .. you're supposed to do that. You're supposed to recognize: "this is something that could eat me". And not recognizing that would be a little strange I guess, for me. But I think understanding from my study of the natural world that this is what these creatures are here to do, and that when they're performing those functions, they are doing something that for them is like...that's the niche they occupy. It helps me understand perhaps a bit more. So, I guess, yes, short answer there are creatures that I'm still scared of but I don't think that's necessarily a bad response and I think learning more about these creatures helps me respect them a lot in their environment and in their habitat, in their context. One could even say their position. And it helps me figure out too, how best for me to interact with them, which sometimes is just not at all.

[00:03:10]

BLOEM: So, your background in science has actually is very helpful in social, humanitarian sciences now?

LEE: Yeah, so I'm getting ready [looks at watch] Oh ok, we still got lots of time. I am in the middle of preparing to teach the course of feminist science fiction studies and it's a course that combines both feminist science in technology studies, which is a specific subdiscipline of feminist thought, and science fiction, which the way I teach it requires an understanding of what science is, how it works and what it does. And so, I'm still absolutely using the training that I got, just as I use the training I got to be a K12 teacher every day in the university classrooms. So, nothing is ever wasted. There are always ways to integrate what you learned into what you're doing. Always. And it's just a matter of finding those and amplifying them, if that's what you want to do.

[00:04:20]

BLOEM: Yeah. I think it also shows that all disciplines really do come in handy and they do intersect with each other.

LEE: They can be made to speak to each other in really profound and productive ways. Not every discipline, inter-discipline, or un-discipline necessarily encourages that, but I do believe that there are ways it can happen and I'm hoping that my classes, my classrooms will become places where that can happen. So, I specifically encourage students, for example in the feminist science fiction studies class to bring in their home-discipline into what we're doing. Because we have people from all across campus and that's the way I want it.

BLOEM: That's amazing. Well thank you for your time.

LEE: Thank you.

[End: Dr Lee B_110_D 18 April 09.15 Part 2 Video.mp4]