Feminist Oral Histories of the University of Washington

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

Professor Victoria Lawson

Interviewed by

Eugenio Quantro-Plaga

May 3rd, 2024

Recorded online via Zoom

Narrator

Victoria Lawson, a retired distinguished Professor of Geography at the University of Washington, has made significant contributions to the fields of relational poverty studies, feminist care ethics, and social inequality through her research, teaching, and administrative roles. Professor Lawson's research has explored the complexities of impoverishment and the potential for building social alliances to address inequality. Her early work focused on the social and political effects of austerity programs, gendered migration, and informal work in Ecuador, while her later research investigated the constructions of rural poverty in the Pacific Northwest and the possibilities for new poverty politics and alliances across the Americas. Supported by prestigious organizations such as the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation, Lawson received recognition for her outstanding research and teaching, including the University of Washington's Distinguished Graduate Mentor Award. In addition to her research and teaching, Lawson served in various administrative roles, including Director of University Honors, department chair, member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on the Geographical Sciences, and President of the Association of American Geographers. In these positions, she worked collaboratively to identify areas of importance and guide initiatives that fostered open communication, consultation, and a supportive environment for creative people to do their best work.

Interviewer

Eugenio Quantro-Plaga is a doctorate student in Anthropology at the University of Washington. He completed this oral history in the Spring of 2024, as part of the ‘GWSS 460: Feminist Oral History Research Methodology’ course taught by Professor Priti Ramamurthy.

Abstract

In this oral history, Professor Victoria Lawson takes us on a journey through her personal and academic life, from her humble beginnings in Nottingham, England, to her esteemed position as a distinguished professor of geography at the University of Washington. She vividly recounts how her early fascination with animals and her exposure to social inequality profoundly shaped her worldview. Lawson's passion for geography led her to pursue undergraduate studies in the UK, after which she completed her PhD at Ohio State University in the early 1980s. As a young graduate student, Professor Lawson encountered significant sexism as a female in the Geography department, where she was restricted from engaging in the work that she was passionate about. Undeterred, she joined the University of Washington in 1986, navigating another challenging, male-dominated geography department. Lawson's resilience and determination led her to forge meaningful connections with the Women's Studies program, enabling her to focus her research on the critical issues of feminism, international development, migration, and inequality. Professor Lawson goes on to detail how her early scholarship and teaching evolved to incorporate critical race theory, whiteness studies, and feminist care ethics, a transformation she attributes to the strong bonds she formed with colleagues and graduate students. As the interview concludes, Professor Lawson shares her post-retirement pursuits, delving into her lifelong love for working with horses and her ongoing quest to unravel the complexities of human-animal relationships. This oral history stands as a powerful testament to Lawson's intellectual and personal growth as a scholar, mentor, and unwavering advocate for social justice.

Interview recorded by Eugenio Quantro-Plaga using Zoom Cloud Recording.

Files
Audio: Victoria.Lawson.m4a
Video: Victoria.Lawson.mp4

Transcript – 18 pages

Transcribed by Eugenio Quantro-Plaga, May 5th, 2024.
The narrator requested redactions and additions to the transcript on May 12th, 2024
The transcription has been reviewed and edited, using italics to indicate the narrator's corrections, by Eugenio Quantro-Plaga, May 12th, 2024.

[Video: Victoria.Lawson.mp4]

[00:00:00] [Beginning of video recording]

INT: Okay, so we are now recording. Good morning again. My name is Eugenio Quantro-Plaga, you can just call me Uge. It's, it's easier. Um, and it is May 3rd, 2024 at around 9 a. m. So I want to just quickly start by getting to know your early background a little bit if that would be okay.

NARRATOR: Sure.

[00:00:26]

INT: Um, could you start by just saying kind of what your preferred name is and what pronouns you go by?

NARRATOR: So, my name is Vicky and I go by she/her.

[00.00.37]

INT: All Right. And where were you born, Vicky?

NARRATOR: I was born in Nottingham, England, in 1959.

[00:00:44]

INT: Ah, tell me about that. How was, how was growing up?

NARRATOR: Um, yeah, that's actually a loaded question. It was fine. Um, my family situation was a little bit, uh, complicated, you could say. And so, um, from a very early age, I retreated to animals, mostly horses as a kind of escape from a family life. So I've been a pony gal my whole life. You can see pictures back here. Um, I live on a farm in Eastern Washington, in Eastern King County. And, uh, you know, a lot of my, I had a very good education. My parents paid for me to go to a fancy private school and I really appreciate that. Um, yeah. But mostly it was a life spent in the countryside and around animals.

INT: I grew up in Wisconsin and so it was a lot of, it was very rural and a lot of cows. Funny enough, I used to be, I used to do therapy in a place that did equestrian therapy. And I learned so much about horses and they're really amazing.

NARRATOR: They are and they are, um, a lot of what I do now has to do with the animal-human connection and understanding the more-than-human world and how we, how we can learn so much more about ourselves and about humanity from engaging with animals. So that's a big theme for me these days.

[00:02:08]

INT: That's great. And I'm Fingers crossed. I'm going to talk to you about what you're doing to these days as well. Um, so just, just a few more questions about your early upbringing because I think it helps us kind of understand your journey to where you are now.

NARRATOR: Yes.

[00:02:25]

INT: Where and when did you go to high school?

NARRATOR: I went to, well, what we call. Oh…

INT: Yeah, sorry.

NARRATOR: It's fine. No, I understand what you're asking. Um, in Nottingham, mostly, although we moved around a lot when I was a child, we moved in, I think, to 11 different houses, most of them in the same area, so I stayed in the same school. Um, so I went to school in Nottingham at an all-girls private school, a very good school. Um, and then briefly we went down to near London and I went to school there as well. Um, which I hated because they had a very strict uniform. It was very British, very stiff upper lip, very controlling. Yeah.

INT: All the things.

NARRATOR: All the things.

[00:03:07]

INT: And do you remember what were some of the big social issues during your teenage years, we'll say?

NARRATOR: Yeah, my teenage years were the 1970s. And, um, the big theme really were the troubles in Northern Ireland. Uh, there were a lot of bombings, um, across London and a lot of violence perpetrated by the British, uh, against the Irish. Um, and this, this sort of the big, uh, struggle between the Protestants and the Catholics around self-determination, et cetera. So that was one big theme. Another one was also so international in a broader sense. And that was, um, the movements for independence from the British, particularly in Africa, that was still happening, believe it or not, in the 60s and the 70s, which is crazy to think about that. But, Um, yeah, I had a great awareness and fascination with the sort of liberation struggles going on around the world. *At the same time,* we were a very apolitical insular little family. And so… so *I wasn't as focused on* what was going on sort of immediately around me? And for example, there weren't newspapers in my house, you know, this is a pre-internet, pre-social media life. Right. And so. Because I was sort of in an escapist mode anyway

around family dynamics. I really was kind of head in the sand about a lot that was going on. Although both of my parents were raised, um, very low income. And so from a very early age, I've had a fascination with income inequality, impoverishment, uh, social injustice. And so that's been a thread that it didn't really blossom until later when I was in school, in college, and the university. But, I think it roots back in my own formation.

[00:04:54]

INT: That's, thank you so much for that context. And then one other question about your kind of journey into… into academia, we'll say, where and when did you go to college?

NARRATOR: Yeah, so I was one of those very lucky people back in the 70s when the, in the UK, and this is going to hurt your heart, the, the state used to pay for your college, right? They paid not only for your tuition, but they paid you an income to go to college. So I was, because I'd had such a great education, I was very lucky to get one of these sort of scholarships to do my three years of undergraduate in England. And I went to a…a little red brick university in the Midlands called Leicester University, spelled Leicester, but Leicester University. And I did, um, a degree there in social sciences broadly, but by the third year, it's only a three-year program in Britain. Um, I focused up on geography, which is the discipline that I've worked in ever since. And then when I finished, uh, undergrad… what I really wanted to do was go work overseas. Um, the… it's called voluntary service overseas in Britain. It's sort of Peace Corps-ish, but slightly less embedded with the Cold War in the way the US system was, um, but it turned out that having a degree was not a skill that they wanted. They wanted electricians or bricklayers or people with practical skills. And so when that path wasn't really open to me. Um… By some random chance, there was a letter pinned up on the message board in my department in Leicester, and it suggested coming to the US to get a master's degree. And, you know, I applied, I applied to UBC and Ohio State and a couple of other places and Ohio State gave me a position and, and funding. And only later did I realize that the impulse to go somewhere was actually about leaving England, which I have very little affection for. So it wasn't actually about studying or, you know, it was just about leaving. So…

INT: Getting out …

NARRATOR: Yeah. Yeah. So I came to the U. S. completely ignorantly. In fact, I'll tell you a story of how ignorant it was. When I arrived, I flew to New York and then I had a layover before I flew on to Ohio, and it was only when I saw the weather map on the TV in New York in the evening that I knew where Ohio was. I mean, that's literally, I had no, I was just leaving.

INT: That's…wow.

NARRATOR: Yeah.

[00:07:35]

INT: And how, and how was that journey, kind of…leaving one country and coming to another one?

NARRATOR: It was surreal because the British view of the U. S. as the coasts, it's either New York or L. A. and, you know, at least in the seventies, you know, there was a lot less, and my, maybe I should say my view, you know, my view from sort of my lens of British culture was the, the coasts. And when I got to Ohio, I was sort of shocked. It was very Midwestern. uh, very conservative. Uh, it just wasn't what I was expecting. However, Ohio State was a force of nature even then. Yeah, the resources were amazing. There were a lot of other British students had come there. You know, it was a great place to be in grad school, but the place as a place was less than exciting.

INT: Yeah, that's always so interesting when, when you go to a university and it's like very awesome while in that very small space and then you leave and you're like, it's just. Nothing, flatland or, not that it's not beautiful, but it's like…

NARRATOR: It wasn't what I was expecting. It wasn't what I was dreaming of. Yeah, but you know when you're in grad school, I'm sure you're aware of … you have a very small life in a way you don't have a lot of money, and you, you're with your peers and it's all the focus on school and that community of students so I didn't really have much of a life outside of that.

INT: Oh yes, I'm in the throes of that right now.

NARRATOR: I know you are. Yeah, that's what I said. It's just all, all-encompassing really. But interestingly, you know, just as, I hope this isn't too much of a digression, but just as the horses were an escape in Britain growing up, when I was in grad school, my outlet was actually athletics and I did a lot of triathlons and that created friendships outside the university that I really valued and that I think kept me sane, frankly.

[00:09:32]

INT: That's really… really good. That's so interesting. I didn't realize that. So I did, I did as much background research kind of on you and your career as I could. Um, but it was, it was slightly challenging to find a… like a huge amount, which I think is better because then I get to kind of know you through organically. It so… if it's okay, could we talk about feminism, a little bit? And then I'll go back to the university experience as well. So could you tell me about when you first became involved with feminism, and. social justice if they're, if it kind of happened at the same time?

NARRATOR: Well, I think, so the social justice thread was always there because, in my undergraduate, I was radicalized by an amazing professor who did sort of critical colonial studies, even back in the 70s. And he was a Marxist and introduced me to, primarily Marxist theory, um, in a way that was really thinking about liberation. And so… so from even my undergraduate years, I had this thread of social justice and the sort of injustices of colonialism and the complicity of the British and a fascination with sub-Saharan Africa. And so there was mostly in the international realm, not so much in the domestic where whichever domestic I was in. Um, but then, I think grad school is what radicalized me. So I was in grad school in the early 1980s, and in the discipline of geography, then as feminism came later, it really, um, the threads were there in the 80s. But in those early years, it was really more about counting women, it was a pretty reductionist, so simplistic way of thinking about what feminism is. I mean, first it was women and then it was how many women and representation and presence and voice, but it was sort of very literal in those early years. Um, especially in geo.., I should, I'm talking about geography because that's been my path to feminism. Not so much, uh, women's studies, gender and women and sexuality studies. So it's a little different for me. Um, But, but in grad school, I never had a female professor. Um, I did, there were some other women in my program that we were few and far between, and we were deeply sexualized. Um, I was by my advisor and really, I mean, almost hands-on ways. It was really problematic. At the time I was just getting through. Um, I haven't had a lot of experience prior with that, that level of sort of sexist manipulation. So. I was sort of figuring out what was going on as it was going on if you like. And, um, yeah, so it was really, so grad school was a difficult experience, but it was radical, but primarily Marxist and masculinist in its theorization. Then came to, uh, the University of Washington was my first job and my only job my whole career. And, uh, again, only woman. Um, I was probably 30 years younger than my nearest, uh, colleague. I was 27. I was much closer to the grad students in generationally and every other way than I was to my colleagues. And they were incredibly patronizing that generation of men. If I could walk and speak at the same time, they were so impressed. You know, *previously* they had *only one* woman tenured, um, in the department's *90 year history (at that time)*. So I was sort of the first. The first one, I wasn't literally the first one, but I was the first one to go up through the ranks. Um, the woman in my position before me had not made tenure. So, you know, there was a whole set of societal, but also departmental level, uh, assumptions. And anyway, it was, it was a pretty hostile environment and it was a…yeah, how do you survive that? Well, one way I survived it was turning to the more mature women graduate students who were amazing. And we had a feminist reading group that with mostly it was grad students, but I would go and, um, I started right at the beginning of my time at UW connecting with folks in, uh, what was then women's studies. Um, and it was Angela Gennorio, who I just ran into in a restaurant the other night. And it was, um, Kathy Kasaba and…

and it was my own students. So I think the way that I came to feminism was very experiential and very personal, uh, but then it became very theoretical very quickly because I had these brilliant graduate student women that were sort of reading and pushing and, and I was looking for safety and places to understand my experience and then obviously broader experiences of exploitation. So my arrival in feminism was gradual, and it was always sort of swimming upstream in my discipline, but I also never was. the feminist. Um, I always was all, always also interested in Marxism and so Marxist feminism. I was very close with Nancy Hartsock and Christine DiStefano. And there was this cadre, Diane Wolf was in sociology back then. So I had reached out across campus to find these women who were way further along in their intellectual journey than I was. And one more piece of context, just so you understand. The slowness with which I came to all this. I wrote a dissertation at Ohio State on, um, women, uh, gendered migration in Ecuador and South America. And, I worked in Ecuador for 20 years and it was an incredible place. I have incredible friendships there. And, um, when I was writing up my dissertation, which was all about geographical inequality, uh, I was forbidden from my advisor to use the word capitalism.

[00:15:19]

INT: Why?

NARRATOR: Because it was *deemed* jargon.

INT: Okay

NARRATOR: Because at that time, it was a threatening theoretical frame because he did not engage with Marxist theory and he thought it was trendy and he thought it was radical. And so he, so I came to Washington, knowing and doing work that engaged critically with capitalism. But with such a limited vocabulary because of how I had been trained in grad school, that it was a sort of a long, slow curve of learning and finding people who would teach me.

INT: No, it's, it's funny because I was kind of perusing your publications and that was actually something I was going to ask because it, and well, you know, I'll, I'll get to that a little bit as well, but I was like, Oh, this has been such a transformation just in the publication.

NARRATOR: No, it was like, well done. It absolutely reflects the journey. So at Ohio State, I mean, my graduate experience involved learning calculus, uh, computer programming. This was, um, so geography was a very positivist discipline and hung onto that really strongly. So it was sort of a rigorous quote, unquote, rigorous social science in the positivist sense. And so that was the training I got in graduate school. The most transformative experience I had in graduate school was when a man called Andrew Sayer came to, uh, as a visiting professor from Britain, he was at Sussex, and he wrote a book called Method in Social

Science. And what he engaged with was critical realism. Critical realism and Marxism together were the beginning of my ability to understand a sort of, um, uh, sort of a critical pedagogy, a critical, uh, theoretical foundation, and epistemology for knowing. And so I was quietly radicalizing, but couldn't write about it in my dissertation. My early publications with my advisor, Larry Brown are very much in that old-school realm because I didn't feel I had a voice or room to do the work I wanted to do. When I came to the UW. Um, I collaborated with a very amazing woman who has passed away and I'm still crushed by her passing.

INT: I'm Sorry.

NARRATOR: Uh, her name was, thank you. Her name was Lynn Staehli. She was a grad student at Washington and I came onto her committee right as she was leaving. And she and I wrote a piece together about critical realism. That was my response to the way that I was treated at Ohio State. And so it was, for me, it was almost having to be a closet radical until coming to Washington, but then trying to sort of catch up, you know, it was really a…, because you've been so controlled and constrained by the way you were allowed to think in grad school. So it's a strange journey.

INT: But it's a beautiful one because look how it turned out, right?

NARRATOR: Yeah. There you go. There you go.

[00:18:11]

INT: Do you think, do you think there was a particular time that you first started to identify as a feminist?

NARRATOR: I think early nineties, you know, I was so, I joined the UW in 86 and the first few years, I was just trying to survive. I mean, I was in a hostile environment. It wasn't actively hostile, it was hostile without them having a fucking clue that they were being hostile, right? It was just a strange… So for the first few years I was, um, sort of wide-eyed and just trying to survive. Um, and as time went on, by the early 90s, I had a second woman colleague, a wonderful woman by the name of Lucy Jarosz in geography. And she and I together started to sort of support each other in sort of coming out as fully feminist, but it was also that was my journey of learning it took years of reading and collaborating to understand, you know what this language was and what it could do. So, you know, late to the party.

INT: Well, yeah, but the… the underpinning seems to have been there so that kind of led you to that point. So…

NARRATOR: Yes

INT: You know, calling ourselves one thing and being one thing, sometimes aren't the same.

NARRATOR: Amen.

[00:19:24]

INT: Um…So in reference to the article questions of migration and belonging. I know it's a while back. I was really impressed how you showed the narratives and experiences of marginalized migrants, in particular women, obviously, and the ways that that can help disrupt linear narratives of modernization and development, um, because it kind of intersects with the work that… that I'm looking to do. So I was just wondering if, yeah, yeah. Although it is in a different context, but yeah. And I… I'm just wondering, did that have a focus, uh, did that focus… kind of influence how you thought of feminism?

NARRATOR: Um, I think feminism influenced that focus would be the better way to say it.

INT: Ok.

NARRATOR: So for me, you know, I was brought to UW to teach quote unquote Latin America. That was the niche I was supposed to fill. But the way that that had been conceptualized in geography, and I would argue even in the Jackson School for that period of time, um, was that, you know, you studied over there, um, to help them quote unquote with their problems. So there was a sort of problem narrative about them over there and the ways that they needed to become more like the US. Sort of that modernization narrative, right? That was very uncritical and very toxic. And I think it was reading international feminisms at that time and their robust criticisms of modernization, USAID, World Bank, and the sort of infrastructure of quote-unquote development. That really led me to understand whose voices needed to be heard and what those voices could teach us. And I would say that in that earlier work, it was more about disrupting the narratives in Ecuador. And the later work was much more about bringing that critique back to the US. There was a sort of transformation that happened.

INT: Yeah, thank for sharing that. And then just kind of one other question in regards to feminism.

NARRATOR: Yeah.

[00:21:27]

INT: I really loved the book, unthinkable poverty politics. And I'm just curious to hear about how critical race theory in feminism informed your understanding of feminism?

NARRATOR: I was again, I mean, so two things I'll say about that. And I want to let you know, we have a book now called Abolishing Poverty that takes,

that takes up, it just came out last year, that takes up these questions of critical race thinking much more robustly. There's a lot I want to say about this and I hope I can think of it all. The first thing I would say is it was through reading international feminists from Latin America, Daphne Patai, Lauren, um, so many, Maria Patricia Fernandez, Kelly… and many, many others that I came to understand the whiteness of, that whiteness was a foundational element of the way "development", and I put that in quotes, was happening, right? That, that really was an agenda not only of modernity of, well, that foundational to understanding modernity is a critique of whiteness, right? That this is… these are deeply interconnected phenomena and are really rooted in race. I don't know. Okay. My husband walked by. I didn't know if he needs to talk to me.

INT: Of course.

NARRATOR: No, he's gone. It's fine. Um, excuse me. So I think I had a sort of appreciation in a light sense that race… racism was foundational to the operation of development and colonialism and indeed of capitalism. Right… But I didn't… Even in the 90s and certainly in the 2000s, even as I was reading that work and beginning to sort of get my head into it a little bit, I still hadn't taken on board the ways in which whiteness was utterly informing everything that I thought about and the way that I theorized. And… Well, the way that I conduct myself in the world, right? That… that came really late. Um, so I, even though I was sort of embedded in these critical theories, to some extent, reading like feminisms, you know, bell hooks in the early days and other, uh, Audrey Lorde and others, I, I hadn't kind of quite owned it. If that makes any, it was sort of still a theory as opposed to an understanding of sort of the limits of my own epistemology, my own theorization, my own even presence in the work. So I have this sort of understanding that the voices of the people I worked with in Ecuador were… had to be central, but I hadn't really quite taken on board how limited and limiting my own investments were… in the ways that I was thinking and theorizing. But so the book Abolishing Poverty, so we did the book, you referenced the Relational Poverty Politics book, um, and, and that book tries to approach gently some of those questions, but in reading it and thinking about it, I realized that I still am really influenced by that early formation as a Marxist and hadn't really taken up critical race theory at the depth and intensity that it needed to be, and that… my role could be to understand that the project of dealing with impoverishment, uh, whether it be in US or Latin America or wherever… was found, was, um, needed to be [Phone buzzing sound], shut up, um, needed to be, uh, lost my train of thought with that stupid bell, it's a text coming in, um… That my role in critiquing poverty thinking needed to be the role of interrogating how whiteness infuses that project, the naming of poverty, the quote-unquote solutions, the poverty regime, the poverty industry. And so in the book that I mentioned, Abolishing Poverty, Sarah Elwood and I wrote a piece about the whiteness of poverty studies as a… as a field. But the rest of

the book, uh, we collaborated with Chandan on this book. And, um, the rest of the book is chapters contributed by critical race theorists. So what we could do was set the stage and say the whole project of thinking about poverty, poverty policy, governance of poverty, development all that stuff is a racial capitalist project. And here's how, and here's how it's infused and centers whiteness and reproduces whiteness, even as it claims to be solving problems, right? And then the rest of the book is written many, uh, by former students of ours. Maggie Ramirez, Michelle Daigle, Jovan Lewis at Berkeley, Anna Gutierrez Garza at, I think she's in Glasgow or Edinburgh, can't remember. Um… and several other scholars, Yolanda Mendoza, all of these scholars thinking from their own work. about why thinking this through the question of poverty is not the right way to think about it, and that we have to think it through critical race studies. So, in a way, coming full circle to what I was saying to you earlier on, it was necessary for me to understand how to de-center my own limits... um, my own formation in order to really engage critical race theory and do it through these deep collaborations with people that, um, are formed in it and understand it in ways that I never will, even though I try.

INT: Thank you. Yeah. Thank you. So, and, and it, and it really, I unfortunately have not read the new book yet. So I wrote, I wrote a note to myself though. Um, I think it really comes through kind of in your work as well.

NARRATOR: Thank you.

INT: Especially the more kind of post two thousands work I would say.

NARRATOR: Yeap…, It gradually shows up. It's slow to come, but I think for me, the piece where I really sort of neat that I wrote it right as I retired, but the piece that for me is the most important in this journey is the whiteness of poverty studies, and it too is not perfect, obviously, but it's where I really try to turn that corner and say, you know, what can I, what can I as a white woman say to this question of the racialization of poverty. And what I can say is, this is how it reproduces whiteness.

INT: It's really inspiring. And I'm happy to hear that you're continuing to publish.

NARRATOR: Not now. It's interesting. I will tell you, this is more on a personal note, but since I've left the university, it's now almost two years, I've really turned away from the university.

[00:28:11]

INT: That's, I mean… You know, and we're going to talk about the university. So I'll get to that also. Um, when, when did you first come to the University of Washington?

NARRATOR: 1986.

[00:28:35]

INT: And when you were applying for jobs, was there anything that stood out about working at Washington?

NARRATOR: No. Uh, so I came, I was on the market in the eighties and it was a time in geography when deans were saying to department chairs, you have to hire some women. I mean, literally, it was that essentialist that narrow, but there was this realization that this department, that these departments were so white and so male, and that this was going to be a problem going forward. So I was, I was interviewed, I think, in five different places. I think I got four offers out of those five interviews. You know, I mean, it was a year when you could, as a young woman. doing the work that I did. And I'm not going to toot my horn because that's literally the essentialism that was at work, right? I could pretty much write my ticket. And I had actually almost accepted an offer at USC. I was going to go to USC and I got talked into coming to Washington for an interview. I was interviewing, tired of traveling. I was trying to finish a dissertation and I was feeling like jobs are just jobs. You know, it was a very different time. And somebody at Washington told me, let me [phone ringing sound].

INT: Yeah, of course, of course.

NARRATOR: Sorry, God. Um… Somebody at Washington talked me into coming. And I was like, Oh, all right. I wasn't very gracious about it. Um, I came in February. It was dark and raining sideways. I never saw the city. Um, the thing that the… the faculty were old and very male and very, uh, you know, the things I described before. And I was like, There, no, not this place. But then I met the grad students. The grad students blew me away. They were fantastic. They were so hungry for change and for new things. And… and it was literally the graduate students that persuaded me to come here because the university offered me $100 more *(per year)* than the offer I had from USC. So yeah… so I came primarily because I saw the potential. I also saw that many of those faculty were going to retire in the next few years and there's a chance for change.

[00:30:41]

INT: And was there a women's studies department when you interned?

NARRATOR: Uh, was it a department? That is a good question. It might have still been a program. I can't remember.

[00:30:55]

INT: And how did you kind of get involved? I mean, obviously, the connections are there, but was there anything that you did to get involved in women's studies?

NARRATOR: Yeah, I mean, just relationships. Really, you know, I, I started showing up, you know, to talks and meeting with the… with colleagues, um… early on Priti Ramamurthy was really important to me. So was Shirley Yee. I mean, there, you know, there were was Angela Ginorio and, um, Kathy Kasaba, there were just, it was people that I met and became allies when I was just swimming in this sea of alienation. And so it was that and theory. Um, finding people that thought the way I thought were curious about the things I was curious about. And then, you know, gradually they drew me in, bless them, and welcomed me. And as I went up through the ranks, I was able to mentor other people. Um, I think I served on lots of tenure and promotion committees and just generally became an ally.

INT: That's.. That's a lot... And you must have been really busy. So it must have been a lot to juggle at the same time…

NARRATOR: But it saved me. I mean, I would say that what was then women's studies is really what saved me. It was like, yeah, there are people here that I can learn from, and that will support me and I can support them. So I don't think I would have survived without that department.

[00:32:13]

INT: And do you think it was a good outlet, being in, you know, I'm making an assumption here based on what you said about geography being pretty male… dominated and that to cisgender white men. Um, do you think women's studies was, was kind of an outlet for you to be able to explore different ways of thinking?

NARRATOR: No doubt. No doubt. It was, it felt more like home than my home department. Yeah, for sure.

[00:32:42]

INT: And what kind of changes did you see the department over time? Because I'm, I'm, I think, I think I'm wrong. I'm not sure. I think it wasn't quite a department officially yet.

NARRATOR: I think you're right. I think, yeah, I don't remember. Yeah, I was more focused on geography, but I think you are right about that, that it was still a program and that we were fighting for that. But, um, it's changed, you know, it has reflected the transformations in feminism over that time period, you know, from the early, early sort of. So gender women focus, the focus on Marxist feminism too, and then the really important role that international feminism played, uh, in the 90s and, and on, um, and then, you know, I've, I've seen the really deep investments, both in sexuality studies and in black feminisms that have

come in recent years. You know, I think… the department was nimble and small and hungry and just kept moving along with intellectual traditions. I mean, the trouble is UW is cheap, and getting positions is a fight. And so it, the lag time is there and sort of how long it takes to bring in the faculty that represent what it is. But, you know, there was always, you know, a strong attention to, uh, queer thinking, queer studies from the beginning because of Shirley and others, you know, and there's always been a strong tradition of a sort of broadly global focus, what I've been calling international, but really is, is more than, you know, it's a relational focus on, um, the dynamics of critical development studies and more, you know, it's, it's been a very I mean, in a way it has mirrored what has happened way more slowly in geography, but it's been a really constant evolution of critical thinking, and it's always been a fight. It's been a fight for resources always, you know, so many women, so many faculty I should say in that department have just fought like hell for the presence and the legitimacy of that work.

INT: I mean, speaking for myself, I really appreciate it. I… I'm in anthropology, but gender women and sexuality studies has been really transformative for me as well.

NARRATOR: It's probably very similar to my own experience at a different time. You know, there has to be a place to go where...

INT: Exactly.

NARRATOR: Where the, where the important, where the questions you care about are important and where people understand the struggles and people are willing to be allies.

INT: And I just, yeah, and it's great when you can see the conversation happening and not just kind of being theorized about, which is important too, but…

NARRATOR: No, right, right. And, and also be around your peers who are willing to ask the difficult questions and willing to fight for them.

[00:35:33]

INT: And then…, I was just wondering, did you note any changes in the kind of women's studies department or GWSS depending on the time period? What were the big changes if you noted any?

NARRATOR: I think they're the ones I've mentioned already from where I was sitting, which was a sort of generational shift. That so when I mean I often think about these shifts in terms of epistemology, right, so I think about a shift from a broad attention to what I'll call structuralist thinking towards the post-structuralist times, and that engages with a lot of different Particular theorizations, right? So, you know, that, that, so for me, it's what I said before, and I'm not sure I have a lot to add,

which is that, you know, the shift from a sort of Marxist feminist, um, focus on patriarchy and, you know, the sort of that early tradition, which you, I don't know if you've even studied back that far, but, um. Um, that was very much the structuralist voice, right? Um, to, you know, in the middle nineties and into the two thousands, the sort of shift to a post-structuralist epistemology and a consideration of the sort of multiplicity of forces in, in play. Um, and a sort of a, uh, getting away from a determinist overarching structural view, uh, you know, all that. So. I think of it mostly in epistemological terms. That's really always been my fascination. It's sort of what, what is considered legitimate evidence? How are we asking questions? Who is a theory? Who builds theory? Who is a knowledge maker, right? Um…

[00:37:07]

INT: These are also very important questions that I ask. So I'm so happy to hear you… You kind of mentioned them, but I'm just wondering when you were a professor, what kind of courses did you teach?

NARRATOR: So when the, uh, in the middle 2000s, um, I had a transformative experience and it's okay, but my husband passed away from leukemia over two years. And as a result of that experience with the American healthcare system and with his dying and with trying to continue to earn a living while also caring for him full time. Um, I may, it became fascinated by feminist care ethics. And so I started thinking, um, through the lens of care, rather than through the lens of economy. I mean, not rather than, I mean, they're, they're intertwined, but, but sort of really changing up my interest in how we engage, because there's a combativeness. to a lot of structural theory about the fight and the struggle and the, you know, all of that. And I just… not to mention what's going on in the world. And I, God… And so for me, it was a shift to thinking through the lens of care as an orientation to understanding an action that is radically different. And so my teaching shifted along with that. I quit teaching about "Latin America", um, and started teaching about sort of global forces of impoverishment, but more particularly, I started teaching about feminist care ethics. So I started teaching a course. called, um, I think it was, oh God, what was it called? It's something about feminist care ethics and poverty and impoverishment and tried to think about how to understand and act upon inequality, social injustice through the lens of care ethics. That was the most radical shift that took place. Um, I always taught a lot of professional development classes. I taught students how to write articles and how to write proposals and, um… That's very interesting… in their ability of students to survive the system. Um…

INT: Yeah, that it's a struggle. I mean, you know very well…

NARRATOR: Struggle. It's a fight. It always is. But to me, um, being a voice for care. Um, and I mean that in, in a lot of different senses, it's a very complicated concept, but I mean it in multiple ways, but really for me,

my work shifted towards thinking about care ethics from a feminist standpoint.

[00:39:38]

INT: And I was wondering if you could share any moments that stood out to you as being particularly joyful or proud moments that you had in the department.

NARRATOR: My graduate students.

[00:39:52- 00:42:24]

Redacted at the request of the Narrator

[00:42:24]

INT: And that's the number one thing that we're looking for. I mean, you know, very well. Um, What would you say is the best advice you've given as a mentor?

NARRATOR: Oh gosh, that is such a good question. Um, only do work that you believe in. Do not compromise.

INT: Yeah that's…that's something that I struggle with pretty regularly.

NARRATOR: I understand. I mean, that was my life was like trying to fit in and trying to survive and trying to make a living. And I mean, the truth of the matter is you have to make a living. And if you are committed to the academy and there are a lot of good reasons to be committed to the academy, let me say, um, it is a… a set of compromises all the way. And I think when it comes to your own work, you will have to make compromises for sure. But when it comes to your own work, don't… Don't… Do it, you know, in terms of department politics. Do it in terms of how you teach students, maybe. Although I… I think that's a question. But in terms of what you commit your life to and your impoverishment to, you gotta believe in it.

INT: I just wrote that down to myself. It's, uh, uh, and then kind of one, yeah, it's, it's easy to lose track of, especially in the quarter system because it goes by so quickly.

NARRATOR: It's in… it's inhuman.

[00:43:49]

INT: Yeah, it's, it's a lot. Um, So kind of one last question in regards to, you know, connected to the universities. How did you see your role as being a scholar and educator and bridging the gap between academia and kind of policy, public issues and… and/or social justice?

NARRATOR: Yeah, I used to think that policy was where it was at. And I'm by used to, I mean, early 90s, right? I used to think that that's where I could make a difference. And I wrote a paper way back when that was actually a criticism of how, um, jobs are classified and labor is valued. And it was actually taken up by the International Labor Organization, the methodology was woohoo!, I've arrived, you know, they're listening to me. But the longer I went on in my career, the more I understood that…that publishing is a black hole. A few people read you. If you get a couple hundred citations, you throw a party. You know, it's that really the, the, the places we make change are not policy and are not our publishing. It's our action. And for me, that was through teaching. And so I had a long-standing collaboration with Real Change News. And we did a series of activist projects. The most recent one was with an undergraduate class *in 2002 an initiative 35 on social housing; was on the ballot in Seattle*, the public housing initiative. Um, my students ran the first public meeting about that, uh, for Real Change. And we did a lot of, uh, in the community work. Uh, we also put the, uh, Real Change Portrait Project in the Allen Library and did a series of education, um, Uh, pieces around that, just as homeless people were being rejected from the hub and other spaces on campus. Um, in fact, even at that… uh… opening *of the art exhibit*, even though real change vendors were there, they couldn't sell the newspaper on campus. I mean, there's just a lot of bullshit, right? So, um, for me, pedagogy was the path to bringing young people into social change work. And it was always activist work, it was not policy work.

[00:45:57]

INT: And how do you think your pedagogy has changed over time?

NARRATOR: It totally transformed, um, partly because the more senior I got, the more I was able to fight for the kinds of classes I wanted to teach, right? In the early years, I was teaching 250 students, and we, you know, we did critical work, but the level of engagement with each student was so much less. And in more recent years, I, um, insisted on doing these activist classes and, and having students out… out in the community as part of their work. I mean, graduate students are almost all, the ones I worked with were always doing activist work anyway. That was their work and their research was part of social change work for them. It was never separate, but with the undergrads, it was bringing them into having a sense of agency and having a sense of… grounded politics of making a change in the community. And that became my whole pedagogy at the end.

[00:46:53]

INT: That's awesome. It's a big loss for the university. I mean, it's great for you, obviously, to retire. I was just… who do you believe is still left out by feminism?

NARRATOR: Oh, what a great question. Uh… you know, I, I'm going to say I'm probably not well qualified to answer this because I'm not reading right now. I'm in the animal-human world and I'm not reading so I, I don't want to say something that's ignorant, which I could easily do. But I think, you know, I'm very inspired by indigenous feminisms and black feminisms and I think there's an it just a world of conversation to be had. I have a brilliant, brilliant graduate student right now that Chandan is also working with. Her name is Danielle Brown, and Danielle is doing work that engages Black geographies and Black feminism to think about interiority, to think about…uh… in the case of black women, uh, she herself is a creative, an artist, and she's thinking about the ways in which voice is expressed through creativity, uh, creative expression, um, protest… the protest of black livingness of living fully in a world that. Is deeply oppressive right and… and not… not telling any more of the damage-centered stories, but telling stories that are about living this thriving joy, the fullness of black life. And I think that focus on interiority as it relates relationally to the world is a really interesting space to explore, um, as a way to, uh, elevate voices, but not through the interview, but through their authentically personal sorts of expressions through creativity, art, poetry, song, whatever. And I think that is truly rich and fascinating.

INT: Yeah, that's, I mean, that's one of the big reasons that I love being involved with the GWSS. Um, because I don't always get that outlet in my discipline.

NARRATOR: No, No… so it's great to have that outlet. And we still, you know, even in the qualitative interview or participant observation, we're still postured as the knower and the interpreter. And I think the work that's taking that away from us. It's probably the most powerful work.

[00:49:29]

INT: And I just, oh, I want to be mindful of your time. So, I want to end on a positive note, I'll take it as positive. Um, what would your advice be, to someone just starting out at the university who maybe isn't the most familiar with, you know, now it's GWSS or feminism or women's studies? What would your advice be to them?

NARRATOR: Find your people. Because if you listen to what you need, if you listen to your heart and you figure out what it is that's alienating you, what it is you're struggling with, What it is that doesn't feel right about the experience you're having or the learning that you're doing. Seek out people that you deeply resonate with and that will find you the theory that you need to do the work that you want to do. It's that simple. It's, it's, it's being willing to listen to the voice inside that says this isn't quite right. Pay attention to that.

[00:50:29]

INT: Thank you so much. Now that's, oh, and retirement. What have you been working on since retirement?

NARRATOR: I have been working on, uh, my horsemanship. I raised mules and horses, and I have been, uh, immersing myself in trying to understand the human-animal connection. Mostly. And I'm just, and de-centering sort of human, uh, senses and voices and expertise. I mean, it's, it's in a way, it's an extension of what we've been talking about. It's being able to listen to another being that has a lot to teach me. Um… and… and that's been a very profound journey of learning about myself and respecting animals and their brilliance.

[00:51:14]

INT: And horses are amazing. I… I had no background in horses before doing equestrian therapy. And I, it was like, I had no idea how mystical they are.

NARRATOR: They are. They are mystical creatures have much to teach us. They're also mirrors. So the energy that I put into the world, they will give back to me. They will tell me more about myself. or about the humans they're interacting with. Uh, it's, it's such a profound journey to be on, and it's been my lifelong passion. Um, so I'm, I feel incredibly lucky to get to do what I'm doing.

INT: And you deserve it.

NARRATOR: Thank you. You're sweet. It's been lovely to talk to you.

INT: And, and you as well. I apologize there, you know, with the lining things up and everything. Um, I'll try, I'll send this transcript to you in a couple of days.

NARRATOR: That's great.

INT: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

NARRATOR: You be well and, and, and look after yourself.

INT: Thank you. You too. Bye.

Video recording ended at [00:52:14]

[End: Victoria.Lawson.mp4]

Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies
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File Release Agreement

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