[Audio: Swarr_Amanda_Audio.wav]

[00:00:00]

DAVENPORT: Alright! So just to get started, could you state for the camera please, your name, your pronouns, and a little bit about yourself?

SWARR: Sure! My name is Amanda Swarr - should I look at the camera, do you prefer?

DAVENPORT: Yeah! Looking at the camera would be great. I'm also happy to move the chair.

SWARR: Sure, no. Whatever you think. My name's Amanda Swarr. My pronouns are she and her. And I am Associate Professor in the department here of gender, women, and sexual - er, what is it? G-W-S-S, Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies! Here at the University of Washington. (laughs)

DAVENPORT: No worries!

SWARR: Where am I? (laughs)

[00:00:36]

DAVENPORT: You're fine! The name change was also somewhat recent, right?

SWARR: Yes! Yeah, yes. So I'm still, yeah no. And I think every department now around the country, people have little variations of the order.

DAVENPORT: Right! I imagine it makes it a little bit difficult to keep track.

SWARR: That's right. We like to call it GWSS (gee-wiz). We're a more fun university!

[00:00:56]

DAVENPORT: I like that! So could you tell me a little bit about where, when you were born? A little bit about your childhood?

SWARR: Sure! I was born in 1973 outside Philadelphia and I grew up in that area, in the Philadelphia area. Um, and, let's see. My childhood - my parents were divorced when I was a few years old, so I grew up with my parents both remarrying and lots of brothers and sisters. I went to the same public school from K through 12, and my mom still lives in the same house that she lived in when I was born, so I have very strong roots in Pennsylvania and in the Philadelphia area. My childhood was sort of unremarkable, definitely really grounded in Philadelphia, and my parents were both teachers in local elementary and high schools, so I was very committed to and schooled in education from a young age as well as protests. Like we would strike almost every year to get them fair wages as teachers. And my parents were both artists and hippies and so (laughs) a strong tradition of social change was ingrained and certainly feminism. I remember early years of feminism in the 70s, my mom had MS. magazine in our home. So feminism was something that I didn't articulate for myself until I went to college, but if I look back at my own history then I think there were a lot of feminist principles that were part of that. So I was super involved in school, I was president of the student council, homecoming queen in another life? (laughs) Captain of the cheerleading squad! So I was super involved with school stuff in a really traditional way in some realms, but also in ways that I was sort of friends with people from all sorts of walks of life. And engaged with lots of conversations that were happening locally. I was really shaped by MOVE, the MOVE bombings in Philadelphia as well as the imprisonment of Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is still a political prisoner in Pennsylvania. So those kinds of histories were part of my own formation as well as activism that I did from my teens onward around abortion, pro-choice activism, and work against the death penalty. So all of that is

part of my childhood history, actually.

DAVENPORT: Wow. That's amazing!

SWARR: Lots of stuff when I'm thinking about it now! I don't usually sit and reflect on it, but yeah. Definitely all those things were super influential on me.

DAVENPORT: Yeah, wow! That's such a young age to be involved in activism and going to protests and all of that.

SWARR: Absolutely, yeah. I organized a bus of everybody from my high school to go to like, a march in Washington DC, like a pro-choice march. And whatever I could get involved in, I certainly was very politically active. I think I had maybe, not exactly aspirations towards politics at a young age, but I was really involved and felt a sense of possibility for social change that made me have more of a sense of responsibility in a way. You know, some people just feel like, "Oh, this is too big" or "I can't challenge that." But I definitely felt that, just through little things, that we were able to make change in local politics, with classmates when I was younger and so, that was ingrained in me, to try and figure out in-roads for change while looking at the big picture as well.

DAVENPORT: Yeah! It sounds like your parents had a really big role in connecting those local politics and those local movements to some of the bigger social change.

SWARR: Yeah definitely. And I think exposing me to lots of ways of critical thinking, right? And in really artistic and creative ways. Like we had a very - my mom still has a very tiny house. But it also served as an art gallery and kids would come and do art classes there, just on the side. So I think thinking creatively about our own self-expression was something that we learned at a young age. I actually find that I use some of those lessons now when I'm teaching! Like thinking about how to

have students express their own thinking in visual ways or in making posters I have hanging in my office, right? And different ways that I try to help them engage different kinds of learning styles that aren't just about an academic model of ingesting theory or regurgitating it, or taking tests, but that are much more about thinking holistically or creatively or through visual models or drawing out a problem rather than just text based. I think that I credit my parents for that too. My dad is an amazing public speaker, he can talk to anyone about anything, so there was never any intentional lessons of that, but I feel like - I feel comfortable in front of a class of 200 because of my dad.

[00:06:44]

DAVENPORT: Right! Do you mind if I jump around a little big chronologically?

SWARR: No, please do!

DAVENPORT: So I'm a little bit curious with what you said in regards to creativity in your teaching pedagogy and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that, and about how feminism has informed your pedagogy and your praxis.

SWARR: Sure yeah! Absolutely, I mean, for me, when I was a graduate student, I took a Feminist Pedagogy class that I think was very influential. It was taught by Jacquelyn Zita at the University of Minnesota. But I think more than that, just seeing modeling of really amazing feminist teachers and mentors has helped me think about how - kind of, different learning styles engaged, right? How it might be helpful for some folks to listen to a lecture, it might be helpful for other folks to work in small groups and talk things out, it might be helpful for others to write things out. So I think there's a real interdisciplinary approach, or inter-genre approach that I take to teaching. But as far as a particular feminist praxis in the classroom, that's really always been important to me by destabilizing a canon of

what kinds of works are important and what aren't. Thinking about accessibility - which is not to say I don't assign difficult theory, because I do assign difficult feminist and queer theory in all of my classes - but I think making that intelligible has been an important feminist praxis of taking complicated ideas and thinking about how to challenge them by really understanding them. So yeah, feminist praxis has always been important to me in also destabilizing power in the classroom. So recognizing what is my position as a professor now, but also trying to think about how to destabilize that in certain way with different configurations of the classroom, by having different folks speak at different times. That it's not just about me imposing ideas but everybody has important knowledges and backgrounds and ideas that they're bringing to the classroom. So I always wanna find ways and look for ways to highlight those interventions too.

SWARR: That seems like a representation of the types of classes that you on a more macro level, right? And the way that you structure those.

[00:09:23]

SWARR: Have you always had a lot of freedom to be able to design classes, like the Theorizing Trans Studies class?

DAVENPORT: Yes! Definitely. I think that that freedom has also informed my decisions about what directions I wanted to go into in academia. I certainly didn't think when I was young, "Oh, I want to be a professor." It was not a particular career goal of mine. I was more interested in ideas of social change and how I could enable those or be involved with those at some level. So I know, up until maybe I graduated grad school - from the point of when I was in high school and college and graduate school, I felt a possibility of a career track of academia or activism. And I didn't really have a clear sense of which of those would emerge. I kept applying for programs where I could do each or applying for jobs where I could

do each and then just seeing what played out as my best options. And that brought me here. When I was an undergraduate student - I did get my bachelor's degree in women's studies, and I was the first person to get that at my school, at Bucknell University where I went as an undergrad. It was sort of like a self-created major. This was in the early 90s, so there were strong feminist faculty members, but there wasn't a program or department of women's studies at the time. So that gave me a lot of freedom to just follow particular mentors who then helped me to create my own curriculum. And then when I was going to apply to graduate schools, there were actually only three feminist studies graduate programs, Masters or PhD, at the time. And so I applied to those three and then I applied to a couple other places where I knew there was interesting feminist work happening. And then I applied to different kind of NGO work too, and what worked out for me at the time was to go to the University of Minnesota where they had a really strong feminist faculty and strong feminist training as well as the MacArthur program that I became involved in which was focused on interdisciplinary social change and actually financially supported my work. And so the program would bring people from all over the world, especially Africa, to study in the US and think about social change as initad from the Global South. So I was really excited about that opportunity there. And when I first went to grad school, I went in anthropology. I didn't really know what anthropology was. I had taken one class as an undergraduate in anthropology called "Witchcraft and Politics." So that was interesting. I was interested in more of the, I don't know, the periphery or fringes of anthropology. And I ended up completed my master's in anthropology doing really feminist work and then switching into a new PhD program that was started in Minnesota in 1998. And I was, along with one other grad student and a group of faculty, on the committee to create that PhD program. So I just felt so limited in anthropology particularly by the kinds of conversations I would have, where I would have to publish. I guess I just wanted to speak more broadly to a feminist audience and be in conversation with folks who were doing similar work. And then classes too, my first teaching experience was TAing for an intro to

anthropology course where we had to teach this textbook about… with sections on feudalism and things that I knew nothing about. But you know, I just quickly tried to teach myself from the textbook but it was very prescribed in a way. And I just felt like moving through my own education and then my own teaching into feminist studies allowed for a lot more opportunities to think through feminist pedagogy and also the kinds of courses that could be taught and the ways that would be really open. And that's been really particularly amazing here in the department for me and my teaching opportunities and the way that we're always as a department looking to reshape our own curriculum and course offerings.

DAVENPORT: Yeah, it sounds like you've sort of been at the cutting edge of helping develop gender and women's studies for a while, since your undergrad.

SWARR: I've been lucky! I think timing was kind to me and I've also just had amazing mentors who were excited to do that work of thinking about how to offer more resources and options for students and faculty trying to do feminist work. So yes, I've sort of surfed the edge, the directions that things have gone for a long time in a way that's really been beneficial to me. And I think that's part luck, of just the timing of when I was going through school, but also is where I found my energy going, right? Cause I definitely see my own radicalization and the radicalization of students as one of my primary goals, maybe a kind of activist goal, of academic work. Of becoming part of the professoriate, right? It has been really about how to do that work for social change and encouraging skill building and critical thinking among students, how to do that within institutional confines and the troubles of institutionalization that we've talked a lot about especially in feminist and queer studies that I think are very salient. So how to work within an institution that in some ways we're inherently opposed to, has been a challenge that I've tried to meet through practical conversations.

DAVENPORT: Yeah! That reminds me earlier of when you were talking about trying to pick

which track to go into, right? "Do we go through the academic track or the activist track?" And I think that's definitely been a challenge of a lot of feminist scholars, to figure out, "Do we pick a track? Or do we figure a way to combine those?"

SWARR: Right, no, absolutely. And I think I've also been lucky because all of my research has been in South Africa since the mid 90s. And in Africa more broadly, but especially in South Africa. And I've worked really closely with activists there throughout my career. And so some of that has been forms of activism, say, around trans law and medicine and medical experimentation that's taken place in South Africa, or certainly the new South Africa in the 1990s and what it meant to create a constitution that was the first in the world to include lesbian and gay folks at the time. As well as HIV/AIDS and particularly opposing pharmaceutical domination and advocating for generic medications and more free access to medicine has been some of the activist initiatives that I've been involved in at different points in time that, through my work in South Africa particularly, that kind of meshed with activism that's happening there. But it's let me feel like I've had a foot in both worlds in some ways. Certainly I've taken a more academic track but activism is really what's very motivating to me. And even in my current work on intersex and racism now, a big part of that is following what kind of work is coming from the Global South and especially South Africa, around rethinking a gender binary through especially the ways it's been medicalized.

[00:17:34]

DAVENPORT: Yeah. I'm curious, how did you become interested in studying South Africa?

SWARR: That's a good question. So when I was an undergraduate at Bucknell University, I was able to do a study abroad program. And I wanted to go places where I would find interesting programs that I thought would be really personally challenging but also that were really interesting to me. And I ended up finding this amazing

program in Kenya and going there for about six months and really getting involved - actually, also with the activists who were working there - but that was my first entree into thinking about African studies concurrently with feminist studies. I studied women's basketry. I actually made that basket behind you on the door! In 1993 or something. Baskets were being created by women and then they would sell the baskets to men who would put leather straps onto them and resell them at a much higher price. So it was this interesting conundrum in the moment. But I was also coming out at the time, or had come out in the early 1990s. So there was a strong divide at the time between African studies and what then we called LGB studies, right? (laughs) And the B was barely in there, right? So it was that kind of time period. So certainly thinking about lesbian and gay studies and African studies were two things that were very important to me, but didn't seem to merge too much. So with that in mind, in the - a few years later, when I went to graduate school - I started grad school in 1995 right direct from undergraduate. It was an amazing time for South Africa to be leading the world in a lot of different kinds of conversations that were happening around sexual orientation and lesbian and gay activism being really involved with the new constitution and with rethinking what South African democracy might mean. So it was just a perfect place, I thought, to start doing research where I could not go in with my own agenda. My approach to methodology prevents me from doing any kind of work where I would come in with a set agenda and a set of questions and try to impose them, but South Africa was a place where I could go and learn and be in conversation and figure out what was happening there that I might reflect on through my work. So it was sort of the serendipity of the freedom of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid in South Africa, with the inception of my own graduate studies and working with this MacArthur program that gave me funding and opportunities and training with the most amazing scholars in, especially African history, but African studies more broadly, who were at the University of Minnesota both as faculty and studying who are now leading the world politically in a lot of ways. So it was just a serendipity of those things coming together that I

just kind of followed and started working in South Africa with folks there. '97 was my first trip there.

DAVENPORT: Wow!

SWARR: Yeah!

[00:20:57]

DAVENPORT: So I understand you lived - you actually lived there, in South Africa, for around two years during your doctoral dissertation?

SWARR: Yes, yes.

DAVENPORT: So what was that like? To be in South Africa for that long an amount of time.

SWARR: Sure, yeah, it was in 1999 and 2000 that I lived there. And it was pretty amazing to be able to really go to a place and stay and get to know folks and become part of their daily lives. I certainly - despite my conflicted feelings about anthropology disciplinarily - methodologically, ethnographic work, especially really inventive and careful ethnographic work has been a model for my own way of thinking about the possibilities of sitting with folks, talking to them, living with them for years. And what kind of relationship you're able to form by doing that kind of really deep work. So I followed that model. And I think what was most surprising was, probably 90% of the time was not really working on my dissertation at all, right? It was hanging out with people, going to get groceries, or cooking, thinking about what kinds of activist struggles were going on and how I might do something - you know, write letters or go to protests or be involved with them even though they were not things I was writing about in my dissertation. Going to social events and making decorations for events, you know? The kinds of

everyday things that are so important to all of us. Being part of those daily experiences really cemented these relationships that I have with so many folks in South Africa that continue to the present. And really also cemented my sense of responsibility and engagement with South Africa but particularly South Africans and the kinds of struggles that they're engaged in, as well as the ways that Africa really gets left out of global conversations and how that's really informed by deep racism that's settled in colonialism. So I think that ongoing commitment is really grounded, not only in my own ideologies but also in my relationships with people who started in the mid-90s. Does that kind of answer?

DAVENPORT: Yeah! I think so!

[00:23:39]

DAVENPORT: So I guess I'm thinking a little bit now about the ways that positionality has informed ethnographic work. And I was wondering whether or not you could talk a lot - er, talk a little bit about how you view your own positionality especially in relation to South Africa.

SWARR: Yeah that's a great question! I think that it was interesting because before I went to start research in South Africa, I was really enmeshed in conversations especially in feminist ethnography, about the problems of positionality, about debates at that time about, "Can there be a feminist ethnography? Is it even a possibility?" And I think - where I see, actually even now, many grad students get stuck methodologically in thinking about all of the pitfalls and problems, right? And then trying to have all of those debates in my mind, all of these ethical conundrums, for example, but then actually go and do research! All of a sudden I'm in South Africa, living there for two years. What is this gonna do? Where does this leave me? And it really forced me to take ideas that, for some folks remain abstract and theoretical, and think about, well how would I really navigate

these complicated terrains, right? This is not just a debate in the pages of academic journals or even among activists. This is like, okay, what does this mean? And certainly I was and remain really aware of histories in South Africa that are so disturbing. I mean, histories of colonialism and histories of research that are, I think - grounded in an ethical research praxis that was really grounded in colonialism. Certainly at the end of apartheid up until the present, South Africa remains this weird place for touristic visits that end up trying to provide some truth or knowledge about South Africa by folks from the Global North who go there for a week or two. So I really was working against that model. And I was really also working against the damage that's been done by researchers who have done that kind of work. Like, there's a prominent filmmaker who activists would talk about at the time who came in, took a bunch of footage and talked to folks. And they didn't provide any permission but then their images were used in a famous film. So those kinds of histories were really fresh in folks' minds and certainly fresh in our conversations. So I really tried to be really conscious about that and really tried to think about that by working with folks on so many different kinds of struggles. I also thought about my own positionality as white, as being from the United States and what that would mean. And certainly it was something that I remained aware of and am aware of now. And I think it really informs all of my work, thinking about how that positionality shapes my interactions with folks, my thinking, and my writing. But I was very surprised at the time at how my identification as lesbian was actually paramount to many of the activists who I was working with who did identify as lesbian or gay at the time, some of whom came to identify as trans. And my partner at the time - and who I did all my research with at that time, Sam Bullington - also was transitioning at that time, from lesbian to identifying as trans. So I think our own very open willingness to have conversations about all of these things and about our own self-identifications in some ways - really, in some ways became very very important to folks we were working with. Their own identifications as lesbian or gay were kind of like their primary identifications a lot of times. So that

was something that they wanted to talk about all the time, that they were very interested in talking about, that was something that they wanted to discuss a lot. So I would say that I was surprised at the way that my own gender and sexuality really were so critical in terms of my own positionality and how I was seen by folks and integrated into some of the activist struggles that they were engaged in. And in their own lives and relationships we were able to form.

DAVENPORT: Yeah! I'm thinking about all of the jokes that I have with my queer friend group and the ways queer-identifying people tend to cluster together.

SWARR: Right! Exactly, exactly! It was like, we had some kind of common experiences in mind, right? And would chat about those. I mean, really, to be honest, so much of our time was spent talking about sex. Like *so* much of our time! Like many people's private lives are, right? And there's a real - I don't know - a kind of forthrightness that's common in South Africa where people like to talk about really explicit stuff and - I feel like that was very comfortable for me and that's always been something that's comfortable to me. There's no TMI for me! There's nothing that folks can say that's too much, like, "Let's chat about it!" You know, it's fine. So I think that level of intimacy that was developed through those kinds of conversations really was very important to me and my thinking and in the relationships that I still have there.

DAVENPORT: Oh for sure!

[00:29:36]

DAVENPORT: So a little bit earlier, you had mentioned that you were beginning the process of coming out. This was in your undergrad?

SWARR: Yes.

DAVENPORT: So could you talk a little about that, if you're comfortable? What that process was like, what support you felt or maybe didn't feel?

SWARR: Sure, no absolutely. It's funny to reflect on it now. It seems so long ago! Well I guess it was over, what, 25 years ago? So that would have been around -I graduated from high school in 1991, so it would have been around '92, and, you know, I had grown up in a space where - in the 70s and 80s where it was certainly comfortable to think about sexual orientation but no one I know identified as lesbian or gay or certainly - we can talk about trans stuff later, that wasn't certainly even in the lexicon at the time. But to identify as lesbian or gay or bisexual was not - it was there, but it was sort of unarticulated in some ways. So I had never know anyone growing up who self-identified as gay or lesbian. But when I went to Bucknell, it was a very amazingly open space. It's actually a really, really conservative school. But there are pockets of people doing this amazing work and so - I think someone had asked me to think about my own sexuality and I'm like, "Okay, I'm bisexual!" And then, you know, I was in a relationship with a man for a number of years like concurrently while identifying as bisexual, and he was super supportive. He was like, "Maybe you're a lesbian." (laughs). I think at some point then it - lesbianism became very important to me particularly how lesbian feminism was operating at the time and the kinds of very radical political possibilities that meant. Certainly the edict of "the personal is political" is something that was very formative to me. So to me, in 1992, lesbian feminism probably meant something very different than what it meant to most folks now. To me it meant that every single aspect of my life was very politicized in a way that I had not realized before. I became vegan, I lived lesbian feminism everyday. I had gone from being homecoming queen with long hair and makeup to shaving my head and, you know, living as a radical vegan. And every day was activism - all day, every day. We would make effigies of women and chain them to benches to talk about campus rape or like chalk up the sidewalks - so I would

say my coming out was concurrent with my overall politicization. And I jumped in full force as I kind of do with everything and started - there was one class, it was called Gay and Lesbian Literature was the first time it was being offered, a course that I took at the time. I became involved with activism at Bucknell and we managed to create a position, a liaison to lesbian - I think it was called Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Students at the time. And I was in that position. So I was the official, I think I might have even gotten paid. I can't remember if it was a volunteer position or not. And I got this little office in a dorm so people could theoretically come see me, although I would just get these anonymous phone calls on the campus phone, and then someone carved a swastika on my door. So it certainly was not like, an uncontested space. There were other creepy things that happened around that time, including like walking across campus and having people from fraternities yell at me that they were gonna come and rape me and these kinds of very violent, aggressive responses to my openness and to the activism that, actually, my partner and best friend at the time, Joel Wainwright and I were doing together. Every day was like making zines and doing all this activist stuff. But it was not an uncontested space, but it was something that was really important to me. And the faculty were amazing about it but the students were a little threatened and confused by it all. So we really carved out spaces that would be amenable to thinking about sexuality in conversation with other kinds of radical politics. And I thought about - political lesbianism at the time was really important to me. What did it mean to have heterosexual intercourse, like what would that mean, to have sex? And so what does it mean to politically decide to be a lesbian outside of sexual orientation was an interesting conversation that I was really involved with in the early 90s. So yeah, as my life progressed and I went forward, I thought a lot especially in the 90s about gender, and I was in Minnesota when early conversations were happening about - with Leslie Feinberg and Kate Bornstein and others who were talking about, what is a category of transgender outside of a medical model? What would it mean to craft a transgender identity that's a political identity, right? That's about a kind of

solidarity and that actually mirrored the work that I was doing in South Africa at the time with communities there who didn't identify as transgender using that terminology at the time but certainly were seeking out medical services to transition and had various gender liminal experiences that they wanted to talk about, that they were really interested to talk about, that often, yeah, involved their own contestations of the gender that they were assigned at birth. And so I was really involved with thinking about drag, what kinds of communities those were, with thinking about folks who were trying to seek medical interventions and how that was a racialized space. Of thinking about the contradictions in law. Actually, at the end of apartheid, around the time that I started doing research there, it had been possible to get free sex reassignment surgeries - at the time [that's what] they were calling them - and then it became impossible to legally change your identity documents. So there were all of these kinds of restrictions that were in place that were really informing my own personal politics and my own relationships. The person who I was with, Sam Bullington, had identified with another name and was initially identifying as a lesbian and went through - we were together for ten years while he was transitioning. So that was certainly part of our everyday life and conversations and thinking about how to think about sexuality and gender identities - an ever-evolving thing for me. Even my own gender expression, if you would have seen me ten years ago, I was regularly mistaken for a boy in public contexts. And I say a boy and not a man, right? A boy. And now I've gone into some kind of high femme drag mode. So... (laughs). Who knows. It's always kind of evolving and my own thinking about sexuality and gender and terminology is really informed by my own political work and also my constant reading of academic work too.

DAVENPORT: Yeah! Well especially thinking about the way that identity labels have changed, both historically and just the way that identity labels change personally for us over time is just so interesting!

SWARR: Yeah! It's so interesting, and I appreciate that you said that cause I think that that I've thought a lot intellectually about temporality and the way that time informs, say, transition for those who might identify as transgender, for example, right? But I think it's true more broadly, that there's ways that we - I don't know, ideas about queer time, I think are just really important for the ways that they intersect that are not just intellectual but are interesting in the ways that we think about our own life trajectories, what they would mean, how they might contest a family model, of getting married and having kids if you don't really believe in both, right? (laughs) So where do you end up? How does that leave you in your own family - as an eternal child, or…? And different kinds of ways so I think we've all thought through these things together in ways that are really - that infiltrate my mind in ways. They're really kind of inseparable from my intellectual ideas or inseparable from my political and my personal ideas, too.

DAVENPORT: Very Jack Halberstam.

SWARR: (laughs) Right.

[00:39:32]

DAVENPORT: So, could you talk a little bit about what University of Washington was like when you came on as faculty?

SWARR: Sure, yeah! I was hired here in 2005 and I think no one had been hired in the department for… I don't know, I want to say, ten years? We were sort of still developing as a department. I was in New York for a couple of years and I came from New York to Seattle. There were a lot of debates within the department at that time and around the time of my hire about the relationship and actually divides between women of color and transnational feminisms. There was some conflict that predated my arrival here but that definitely informed my hire and

who would be hired in the position that I got hired in, and what that position would mean. So in my first year, we had a conference that addressed some of those themes of women of color and transnational feminisms and what are some common grounds. I also started in the department in 2005 in the same year as David Allen was chair and he was the first - he was coming from Nursing and moved to our department and was the first white man to ever chair a women's studies department in the country. So there was national news about his appointment. And I should say too, it was certainly an interesting moment where the department was shifting in leadership, and also I think that Sue Ellen Jacobs had retired right before I came. Judy Howard had been chair before David Allen. And so it was sort of this new time when a lot was shifting within the department, yet we also have this really decades-long history. So it was actually a really exciting moment. My feeling about the department from the beginning was that I had a sense of the warmth and openness of the department, particularly around curricular development and the development of our undergraduate and graduate programs, what those would mean. I felt like there have always been really exciting conversations about what the possibilities are for the department and how we can really be responsive to students. That's definitely been a focus of the department as a whole. But also responsive to whatever intellectual visions we might have and how those changed in terms of broader conversations within what we were calling women's studies at that time. One of the ways that obviously manifested was through the change of our name from Women Studies to Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies, which was kind of a long process of discussion and debate about what it would mean to make that shift, what we would lose and what we would gain as far as support and also our political commitments, was part of the conversation. Where sexuality would fit into that, I think is something we're still talking about. From around 2006 to a few years after that, I was part of conversations on campus here too about what is queer studies at the UW, and how can we be in a place like the UW that has had, at least at that time - very little work on campus in queer studies, let alone trans studies. And it was an interesting

conversation to think about what kinds of curricular development we can do, could there be hiring specifically within that work of those field? Myself and others were doing that kind of work - queer and trans studies is at the heart of my work. But I wasn't hired to do that work. I do that work, and I've been supported in it, but it wasn't - the job that I answered the call for didn't mention that. So it's been sort of incidental hires. So we ended up creating graduate certificate in what we ended up calling sexuality and queer studies. That was debated, too, right? Cause I think that terminology was also shifting from LGBT at the time to queer studies, or what that would mean cause that shift hasn't happened uniformly, including if we look globally where some of that terminology is not translated well or been adopted or may be really deficient in some ways. So we debated about the institutionalization of feminist studies, even what it would mean - we ended up calling our PhD program, our doctoral program Feminist Studies. So there were lots of debate I think at the time that - at the time that I joined the department but also just ongoing that I've been able to really feel like we've had interesting collaborations about the continued process of [developing these related fields] - I don't know if that's answering your question, but!

DAVENPORT: Yeah! I guess I've got a couple of new questions now! (laughs)

SWARR: Okay!

[00:44:37]

DAVENPORT: Yeah! So you touched on your experiences within the department. I'd love a little bit more, since you had mentioned that there wasn't a lot of work going on queer and trans studies at UW at the time, what the general attitude and climate was like outside of the GWSS at UW.

SWARR: Okay! At the UW… Yeah, I mean my own possibilities for teaching those classes

were always really open within the department. I mean I came in having taught a class when I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota in transgender studies even though we didn't call it transgender studies at the time, I think it was called… "'Real' Women" and the real was in quotes. Kind of way to kind of unsettle was it means to be a woman, or how we all do, right? But within the context of Women Studies. So I came in and that was through the work of Professor Naomi Scheman at Minnesota, who had developed that course in very early trans studies in 1997. And so I came in teaching a different version of that course and then developed it over the years into lots of different courses. And I think there was also openness and actually support from the department and from the university for me to develop courses like the course I now teach called Queer Desires. So there was a sense that that work needed to be done. That was sort of the - my sense of how the UW as a whole was responding, like, "Oh yes! We need that work, but we don't have a lot of institutional support for it." That was also around the time that Jen Self was hired to do the Q Center, I think was also around 2005, to run the Q Center, and they continue in that position today. And then was also a Master's - er, a PhD student in Social Work. So Jen was also kind of - and worked with our department as a student in our department, you know taking classes in our department as well. So there was that kind of collaboration with the Q Center that continues at the UW. The institution will of course support coursework here and there. And then as we developed the graduate certification, there was opposition. In some ways we were piecing it together with faculty from across the UW. And I always remember that when we wrote our proposal [for the graduate certificate], it had to go through the board of regents, like this kind of process that was the highest level. And they opposed the word "queer" in the name because they thought it was a derogatory slur. And we had to try to explain to them at the time like, okay this is a well-established academic field that's been operating for decades and is very important for the intellectual life of the university, right? As well as the kind of social understanding of students' own experiences and needs, in terms of the Q Center's role in working with students

and supporting students. So luckily we were able to get that passed through, and it was then eventually, integrated as part of our department and that's kind of continued on. So I'd say overall there've been different kinds of responses. Definitely support and I do think that we get lots of students from across the university who really seek our department as a space to do queer and trans work because there just isn't that support in their [departments] - and same thing for feminist work, folks will come and say they need us to help - students will come for coursework and for support with graduate work as well, to say that they need the kind of grounding that our department provides. And so I wish there was more support within disciplinary formations for those students, but we appreciate working with them and supporting them in that work as well.

[00:48:39]

DAVENPORT: Yeah… It's one of the - it's so interesting with thinking about the word "queer" being contested and sort of the way that shift has happened over time. That's like one of the challenges of doing reclaiming work, right?

SWARR: It's so true! No, absolutely. I think like - and how do you work within the concept queer when you're still contesting it and feeling like, oh, in some ways these terms have these really revolutionary potential, but in some ways they get institutionalized and then take on - same with queer and trans terminology - that they get kind of institutionalized and then that has its own problems, right? And ways that certain folks get marginalized from that. And then it means something else entirely that goes beyond any kind of like dictionary or simple definition. Teaching is like, one of my major challenges, where students are like, "I wanna be able to define these terms." I'm like, you will leave here having fewer definitions than ever. And that's when I know we've succeeded, right? (laughs)

DAVENPORT: Right! (laughs)

SWARR: Sorry.

DAVENPORT: You'll come out with five new definitions.

SWARR: That's right! If you have five completely new definitions, you're on the right track. If you have one easy sentence that will answer this question, you [easily] define this term and you're missing something.

DAVENPORT: Right for sure!

SWARR: I mean that's the paradox of women's studies as a field, so I think certainly queer and trans studies follow that. That paradox of working within a term that you're constantly contesting or pushing back against.

DAVENPORT: Oh for sure, and with all three of those field slash subfields, the disciplinary aspect is - is really interesting, right? And just thinking about - I know that as trans studies is becoming more institutionalized, that the question of disciplinarity has come up a lot more often.

SWARR: Absolutely, no! It's such a huge - it's a huge, ongoing conversation. I think there's no good answers to it. But it has to keep happening so we can think about what it means and how to work within it. Or not, right? Contest it. Throw it out.

DAVENPORT: For sure!

[00:50:54]

DAVENPORT: So you have mentioned that you've had a lot of like personal relationship with trans folks. And I was wondering if you could expand on that a little bit.

SWARR: Sure! Uh… in terms of like what the relationships - or what do you - in what way would it be helpful?

DAVENPORT: I guess I'm thinking a little bit about how do you understand trans lives within the context of your own life?

SWARR: Okay! No absolutely. I would say - yeah, it's interesting to think about in terms of our conversation about terminology. Because I think what trans lives, or the term transgender, has meant has shifted so much for me in my own life and also in my own work. It's been such a shifting terrain. I think certainly all of my own relationships, and my own relationship to myself too, has always been about kind of challenging gender expectations, right? So I think feminism is kind of inherently dedicated to a problem of pushing back against - around social norms related to gender. But I wanna kind of differentiate that from experiences of folks who identify as trans and have a particular kind of experience. I think there can be this like - this troubling tendency sometimes to say, "Well, we're all just trans!" Right? Like, I think there's a kind of erasure that happens through that of like, if you say gender doesn't exist, that doesn't mean there aren't specific kinds of experiences of violences and different kinds of shared experiences that might happen, right? Around those kinds of identifications. And so I'd say that I've been really privileged and lucky in that many of my friendships and relationships from undergrad but especially time in Minnesota coincided with our collective activism around trans issues that were really kind of grounded in Minnesota in the 1990s when we were kind of thinking about having conferences and activism that were thinking about what transgender has meant. And I would say the relationships that I formed from that time on - and the ongoing kinds of relationships that I've had, including with folks in South Africa, have really informed my own thinking about the violence of gender binaries and how the multiplicity of that violence works. Through legal expectations, through different kinds of surveillances, right? Say,

going through an airport or anywhere where identity documents are involved. The kind of violence of medicine, right? From the minute of intake at a doctor's office, where you're supposed to fill out particular kinds of forms to weird interactions with doctors, to trying to meet expectations that doctors might have around their own limited framework of diagnoses versus things that aren't diagnoses. And then certainly my relationships and conversations with folks around time and how identifications change over time have been really salient for me and have really always made thinking about whatever transgender studies means in this moment, and has meant, and will mean in the future, very, very personal for me. So trans studies has never been a subject of my research or academic interests. It's always been something that's involved a really strong self-critique for me as well as the everyday experiences of my own and of my - through my relationships with other folks of their experiences too. So it's something that I take very personally, and I try to integrate that into my own actual teaching methodology, to say, from the first day of when I teach, for example. Intro to Transgender Studies -which now has like a hundred students in it - I'm like, we're gonna come in here really centering the voices and experiences of trans folks. And if you have some questions that you're trying to work out, or I don't know, phobias that you're bringing into the class, I really want you to write those out and you can have that conversation with me. But I want to create the classroom space as something different where we're not gonna really give a lot of voice to those kinds of really objectifying discourses, that we want to create different kinds of parallel spaces within pedagogy. And I think I'm just - I try to think of ways to be cognizant of those kind of everyday challenges and violences and find spaces that will really - er, create spaces in the classroom that will really, I guess, pedagogically push back against them if that makes sense.

DAVENPORT: Yeah for sure.

SWARR: To say like, this is very personal. We don't know who in the classroom is

identifying as trans, we don't know, you know. I've often had an experience where students will transition like five years after taking a class. So I also never want to make an assumption about a student, let alone folks in my own personal relationships! I've just always had an experience of folks' gender shifting, right? And so I just wanna create whatever possibilities for that that I can - and that I think comes from my own experiences. And my own experience of myself too, yeah.

DAVENPORT: Yeah. Going back to temporality.

SWARR: Right! Exactly, exactly! (laughs) And the impossibility of these namings, right? But at the same time, the importance of identity communities, identity categories and communities for lots of folks, too, right? Or paradoxes.

DAVENPORT: It's so slippery.

SWARR: Mhm! Totally.

DAVENPORT: Yeah! So let's see… what time are we at? Oh my gosh, we've talked for almost an hour!

SWARR: Oh my gosh! I'm sure I've barely gotten through half your questions!

DAVENPORT: You're totally fine!

[00:57:36]

DAVENPORT: So I guess to - I have a couple of wrap of questions, if that's okay?

SWARR: That's great.

DAVENPORT: I would love to know a little bit more about the future that you envision - let's start off with just the department.

SWARR: Okay. Well, I feel like we're - are you talking to other folks in the department, or just me? Everyone in the class is -

DAVENPORT: Just you.

SWARR: Okay! Cause I feel like, other people may have said this. I feel like we're at a really exciting moment in the history and future of GWSS. We've changed our name and our vision over the past few years, especially with the introduction of three new folks, who I feel like are really - Bettina and Cricket and Kemi - who I feel like are really helping us to reframe our histories so we're at a moment where we're celebrating our long history of fifty years, which is incredible. But we're also simultaneously really looking toward what would curriculum revision mean? What does it mean to offer a bunch of new courses that are doing something completely different? That move away from, I think, the subjectification, the making of women or queer people or trans people as we've talked about - for example in the work that I do - as subjects of our research and really turning the gaze into, how do we think about the processes and power dynamics, right? That really create these kinds of subjectifications. So I think moving away from a model, for example, of a course that we've offered for many years called "Race, Class, and Gender" into a model lets us think intersectionally, lets us think transnationally. And think about what would that mean pedagogically, to unsettle categories, value the kinds of community formations that have been - that have formed around these kinds of categorizations. At the same time, looking towards alternate visions for the future, right? So I feel like, we're in this really exciting and growth-filled moment while we're reflecting on our history. Maybe it can give us added strength for looking toward the future.

DAVENPORT: Yeah, absolutely!

SWARR: Exciting!

[00:59:59]

DAVENPORT: So, what do you picture for the future for yourself?

SWARR: For myself! Um, you know, I'm really optimistic about the future for the department and for myself. I mean I feel like I'm in a really privileged position to have this position at the University of Washington. And also to be in a department that's allowed me so much intellectual freedom but also intellectual community to think through the issues that are most politically salient to me. So how to approach the issues that are at the core of my research and also my teaching as well as my service, actually, those are kind of the three pillars of what we're supposed to be doing[: research, teaching, and service]. I feel like this is just a great opportunity for me to think through those things simultaneously. So not to separate my research as something that's happening on my own when I sit at my desk and do some writing, but that's happening in conversation with South African activists, with students who I feel like I learn an amazing amount - every single time I teach a class, I end up knowing completely different things by the end of the class from the communities of students we have here at the UW, especially who come to GWSS class, I mean are just incredible. So I feel like I may not be answering many questions, but that I'm excited about raising more question all the time, both in my own pedagogy and in my openness to my relationships with colleagues, my relationships with activists, and my relationships with students.

DAVENPORT: That's great!

SWARR: It's a good moment. It's a really good moment.

DAVENPORT: That's so exciting.

SWARR: I'm super optimistic. I could give you a more pessimistic version, but I drank a lot of coffee, so I'm feeling cheerful. (laughs)

[01:01:56]

DAVENPORT: Alright! Well, do you have anything else that you want to tell me before we end the recordings?

SWARR: No! I'm just appreciative of our opportunity to have this conversation! Thank you so much!

DAVENPORT: Thank you!

[End: Swarr_Amanda_Audio.wav]