

Feminist Oral Histories of the University of Washington

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

Serena Maurer

Interviewed by
Leo Lollie

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Zoom, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Narrator¹

Serena Maurer is a mindfulness and social justice consultant. She works with many schools, organizations, and businesses to bring change and awareness to the community. Her goal is to bring compassionate awareness to people so they see how separation and devaluation in our communities are due to the system. This approach is drawn from her experience in nonprofit work, her education in public affairs, and her PhD in Gender, Women, and sexuality studies. She also has twelve years of teaching and compassion curriculum development. She offers workshops for groups of people and individual coaching to help people deepen their awareness, work through systems of oppression, and move toward collective liberation.

Interviewer

Leo Lollie (b. 2000) is a graduating senior at the University of Washington. Leo is pursuing their BA in GWSS and hopes to find a career that makes a positive impact through promoting equity and inclusion.

Abstract

In her oral history, Maurer discusses how her view of feminism and the world changed and developed over her career. We start by discussing feminism at the time she was in undergrad and how the goals of the feminist movement have developed since then. We then discussed her time at the UW public affairs master program and how it wasn't the education that was going to help answer the big systemic questions she had. After joining the GWSS PHd program she was able to expand her view of feminism from the more traditional white feminism to a more transnational intersectional perspective. This new view helped her in her teaching career and ultimately led her to start her own mindfulness education nonprofit, where her and her team are currently working to break down white supremacy and racism in the workplace.

Interview recorded by Leo Lollie on zoom. 36-minutes.

Files

Video:

https://washington.zoom.us/rec/share/tAPN1qOEhGFe58I-_VuqlLYwnOM_lKdcn7IsqJVUkMDerf21Igmol6jtMwi5OEgP.FU3ra_F2MS0VVv-j?startTime=1714069402000

Transcript

Transcribed by Leo Lollie, April 2024.

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

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[00:00:01]

LOLLIE:

Hi welcome to our GWSS oral histories interview, my name is Leo lollie I am here with Serena, let's get started with your full name and maybe a little bit about where you are from?

MAURER:

Sure, my name is Serena my last name is Maurer, I was born here, on coast Salish lands. I spent a lot of my life living in this area, as well as some other places.

[00:00:43]

LOLLIE:

Awesome, when did you first become involved with feminism and feminist activism?

MAURER:

That would be, in college I would say. That's where I first started taking women's studies classes and was part of groups and projects on campus, and kind of coming to understand and organize some beliefs I had grown into but not understood as part of some wider movement or vision.

[00:01:45]

LOLLIE:

Interesting, so like you said early college, where did you go to undergrad.

MAURER:

I went to middlebury college in Vermont.

LOLLIE:

What did you major in, Did you start with women's studies or was there a path to get there?

MAURER:

Well I was actually interested in doing women's studies as a major, but I was advised not to do that by a family member who said it was not smart or useful or what would you do with that, which is funny because all my work now kind of comes out of that. And I think you know, the visions of different times, what fits with a capitalist agenda and what doesn't. I was really into creative writing and to pursue creative writing at the school I was at was to major in American literature, that's what the creative writing track went through and I also ended up getting a women's studies minor.

[00:03:29]

LOLLIE:

What were some other the important social and political issues of the time like while you were in undergrad?

MAURER:

Well what first comes to mind is projects I got involved with on campus, one of them was establishing a women's center on campus. That was a movement of the time was to have what was called at the times a women's center. I was part of a group that was pushing for that which was exciting and fun and happened. I was able to go back and see it, I don't remember when it actually opened. There were also students of color finding their way in relationship to the racial politics on campus and I think it probably called multicultural students group. I was taking some classes, it was an African American literature class and I was part of conversations in that class as well as in the multicultural students group. I remember I think it was probably the term pc, like arguing about like why does it matter the words we use. I remember giving a speech about the words we use and how they affect other people. Of most of what I was taught in women's studies was taught by white women that had grown up with a certain kind of feminist movement and academics, so I got a solid grounding on a certain view of feminism. It was helpful for grad school when I could sort of take that perspective apart and look at it from other view and reactions to that kind of feminism, I felt like I had got a pretty good footing in that

college.

[00:06:49]

LOLLIE:

Going from undergrad from grad school, was there anything in between? Did you start your career then wanted to go back to a women's studies program I was curious how that went.

MAURER:

Yeah so I went from college to non profit work, I was doing fundraising and story telling work for a nonprofit in Washington DC and it was they called it a community education non profit so staff would go into public schools and work with kids, I was telling stories and collecting stories in order to raise money then I moved back to the Seattle area and did a different kind of non profit work mostly with domestic violence agencies, I started feeling the urge to go back to grad school when I was working in domestic violence, I think the weight of working with individual victims of abuse in intimate relationships. At that point it was all women focused, the main agency I worked with was called domestic abuse women's network so it was a different time along languaging around women and gender and gender identity. So some frustration and some desire to kind of figure out how to work with these patterns on a larger scale is what sparked my interest in returning to grad school. I originally applied to the masters of public affairs at UW, I got into that and started that, so I was in that program it is very much about public policy and how it works and shaping public policy. I felt very limited to me and I kept bringing up questions of power and history and race and gender and class. All kinds of systemic questions and they weren't met with what I was looking for. We had a class called race and public policy and a class called women and public policy, the race and public policy got close but it was only one class. At the time the women's studies phd program was getting going. I think it was my second year of the mpa I started the phd congruently with it, I started taking classes before getting in and the program starting that helped me start to see how oh here are these spaces, I don't have to ask these questions they are already built into the

courses and the spaces were alive with people who want to talk about these things. And coming out of domestic violence work for me that was what I was looking for. How do I talk about what's happening with the women that are coming to us on more of a systemic level.

[00:11:48]

LOLLIE:

What were some of the classes that changed or shaped the way you see thing or that gave you the answers you were looking for.

MAURER:

Before getting into the program I started with swell and Jacobs's women's words and wisdom. Before I got more deeply into conversation that was sparking things for me. Then as I moved into the program we had a set of three courses I don't know how they do it now but we had three core courses, there was a theory course with tonny Barlow, a method course and a histories of feminism with Shirley lee. It was a lot moving in relationship to each other. Tonny Barton's class was very challenging but it sort of blew things open for me which was really far away from public policy conversation and really took me to the edge of my thinking especially with texts that was my first time reading Judith butler amongst other texts. Working to figure out what this was all about was mind opening. David Allen was teaching the feminist methodology class which changed the way I did research and thought about research, what I wanted to research but more importantly how. The histories of feminism class was important in situating what I learned in undergrad, I could see this was the time of women's studies I learned in undergrad and kinda of history frameworks and perspectives of feminism and here are someways in situating that in other movements and cultures perspectives.

[00:15:11]

LOLLIE:

So you took the basis of the more white feminist in undergrad and with The PhD was able to expand and get the more broader perspective of the systems overall. Then I saw on your website you moved into teaching for a bit?

MAURER:

I was in a program and we had TA and RA programs, I started TA for the intro to women's studies courses then a few years after that I started working with Priti, in the development course at the time I think was called women and economic development course and the gender and globalization course so working with Priti was really expanding the trajectory we were talking about expanding the white feminism to more of a transnational feminism. So through working with Priti and was part of some conversations about anti-racist versus transnational feminism not just versus but how can we come together and what can these perspectives lend each other.

So I ended up working with Priti on my disertation.

LOLLIE:

So you ended working in the program being in the program but then what made you take the next step in starting your own website where you offer workshops and courses, what made you branch out and start your own thing.

MAURER: I taught in and around the UW before getting my PhD I moved to Copenhagen and taught there for a few years and also brought some students from the uw to do a study abroad program there. That was helpful in expanding my sense of not just GWSS but other ways of organizing some of the approaches and frameworks I had been using. The institute was called the institute for intercultural studies and the department I was part of was called cultural encounters which was rooted in Stewart hall. It was sort of a different way in to the work I had been doing which was helpful. Also a whole different set of way of being an acedemic, differenemt organization of ways of being an academic. Different organization of acidic spaces and relationships. That was helpful for me in thinking about my own challenges in acedemic which I had been steeped in for the last 8 years between the two degrees. So I started branching out a bit and started to think of what if I tried to bring what I have been working on in acedemic spaces to non acedemic spaces, what does this idea of translation even mean. I was part of the poi kid humanity program when I was doin gone PhD it was helping student think of what there work would look like outside of an academic space, what might this

move be. Is it sharing your work or partnering with other people. This was important to me because I felt stuck in the academic world. Especially given that people I was trying to some research with during my PhD was with people who would not read academic text so I felt some disconnect and discomfort with that. So I started offering at first to some schools to come in and talk with teachers about what's happening with race and gender in your school system and how we can relate to these issues, what is going on with families and children then it just started growing from there. I Partnered with more and more people over the years, and sometimes that work can be very structured or what a school wants and sometimes it's we don't know what we want just come and try some things. So it's kind of taken on different forms, in more recent years it has been a lot of work that has to do with white peoples, I'm part of a collective called no big deal, which works in different ways on how to organize and move towards what we call social justice work from a more mindful and embodied place. Bring in that over the years with this collective that has more and more influenced how I do my consulting work, which has called me to work with more white people, which initially I didn't want to do. I have been focusing on white classes partly because it's nice to develop something and continue to work on it over time and partly because it feels important to me to be calling for Ruth at work to be done and actively supporting it. So that's what I've been doing on my own, then when I work with agencies and schools that's cross racial work then I do it in collaboration with my colleagues.

[00:24:14]

LOLLIE:

So you spent a lot of time in academia so you really understand these things, then adding on that mindfulness does that help relate it to the average person, I'm curious how mindfulness might make people more accepting.

MAURER:

It's funny I feel like often in organizations I have worked with, what we call as anti-racist work or work on inclusion or equity that had taken on an energy of its own and has been

adopted in professional spaces so there is often more willingness to step towards that not often engage deeply with it. The mindfulness often catches people off guard especially when I'm asking people to really feel into their bodies and feel how white supremacy lives in our bodies and how we have been taught where we have taken it on and what happens. That has felt harder to bring in I mostly go with the anti-racism calls and say yes well go in and start to introduce embodied mindfulness over time, it tends to really resonate with some more than others so it's kind of a negotiation. More recently I have been writing it into the proposals which I think is a smarter move, it sets all of us up from the beginning so I don't have it. Be sneaking around trying to fit it in it's more like here's what I'm going to do if that doesn't fit that that doesn't fit and that fine we're not a great fit right now. It can certainly be something that allows people to drop in. Often I hear people say this space is nothing like I have felt at work before, and that people are talking about that as a support to them they aren't often clear on why how how that is but there is a feeling behind the way we are engaging with certain topics and practices that deals with often a relaxing in people's bodies. Some times people are real resistant, people learn how to function in ways they feel are necessary and people have good reasons for the way they function and if you question that it may feel disorienting and like the ground being pulled from underneath.

[00:29:43]

LOLLIE:

That's interesting because your trying to make people aware of how these systems effect us personally, which is what we are learning in class. It's really cool I never imagined that being a way for people to break down those dynamics especially in the workplace.

MAURER:

A lot of anti-racist work, because we are all steeped in the cultural norms we are steeped in you can bring white supremacy capitalism heteronormativity to a lot of the anti-racist work and so if you really want to dismantle those systems we need to come up against them. If I come at you with a list of definitions your supposed to

memorize and say the right words in every conversation, that's white supremacy right there. How can we get a little more vulnerable kinda like how am I stepping into this, it's more inquiry based so im not telling people the right way.

LOLLIE:

So they might be willing sometimes or not?

MAURER:

They may be willing or not but I try and open up the space you know.

[00:31:45]

LOLLIE:

Just one more question about issues today, you said back in college people were realizing what they are saying effects people, about today I know we are still working on breaking down white supremacy and racist but is there any other issues you are interested in or working on?

MAURER:

I have spent the last eight years working on a project called Latina friends moving the soul. It started in North Carolina and was brought to the UW, there is a professor in public health at the UW who reached out to me because she was trying to bring mindfulness into the program so we started working together on some pilots on some local lanix organizations and ended up getting a five year grant. That has been part of my work for a while now and I really loved developing the content in collaboration especially with my closest collaborator at the time and fisilitating program. No I'm interested in taking that work to different spaces and creating more spaces for this kind of work. Working with staff and organizations on mindfulness based social justic emovent and embodied mindfulness in a different way then the other consulting work.

LOLLIE:

Thank you so much for meeting with me, I really appreciate your time and adding to my knowledge. I hope everyone listening in my class or however watches got something out of it as well.

MAURER:

Thank you, good luck in your studies and journey through this.

MAURER:

Great! Alright take care, bye

LOLLIE:

Good day, bye