INT: Let's start with your name and how you are affiliated with the Gender Studies program at UW and where you started with everything.

YEE: My name is Shirley Joann Yee. I am Professor of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. I also have adjunct appointments in the American Ethnic Studies Department and in the History Department. I came to UW as an assistant professor pretty much right out of graduate school in 1988 and I have been here ever since. I love Seattle, I love UW, and I definitely love being in the department and watching how it has grown over the last 26 years.

I never thought that I would actually end up here, either in Seattle or in something called Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies. Since I was a child I had wanted to be a historian. I was born in New York City in 1959 and grew up in a very small suburban town in northern New Jersey. And that, in many ways, shaped my experience in terms of my desire to become a historian. And later to really begin moving from the Northeast farther and farther away and ending up to a very happy place in Seattle, Washington which I didn't even know existed when I was growing up. I thought the West was anything west of Pennsylvania. I definitely feel that being out here has been a culmination of many years of personal and intellectual growth.

My family consisted of my parents, who were professionals. I grew up in a middle class home, although my parents grew up very poor in Boston. My father, because of the GI Bill was able to get a college education after the Second World War in chemistry. He was a research chemist and worked with companies like Singer and Dart, the maker of Tupperware. He was in the research and development part of those industries. My mother was also college educated. She was the first woman in her family to go to college. She went to Simmons College which was an all-women's college – I think it is still all-women's college – in Boston, Massachusetts. That was significant for her because she had always wanted to go to Simmons growing up and in a family that valued education but really couldn't

afford it. She grew up one of five children in what was essentially an attic apartment in China Town in Boston. And so she would go by Simmons College almost every day and dream that she would go there. So she eventually did and majored in what was then called—what we would call Food Science now, but she studied to be a dietician. And eventually became—I think was the first Asian American female administrator at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Newington, Connecticut. But, like many women of her generation, she didn't really see a future for herself beyond that – as far as being female and Asian American, and so married my father and went on to have four children.

I was the second of four. My older sister Pam, after whom our Feminist Disability Studies Award is named after, was the first born and was soon discovered that she was developmentally delayed. And my mother, being a rather radical person at the time, did not follow doctor's orders to institutionalize her and kept her at home. And so the presence of my sister in the family really shaped our dynamics and sensitized us to people who were not born as able as other children in the neighborhood. Then my two younger brothers came after, so there were four children in this home.

The area in which I grew in northern New Jersey eventually shaped my passion for history. It is a town that – the name of it is Whippany – which is about 30 miles west of New York City. Its claim to fame was that the American Revolutionary Army camped there, George Washington marched through. And every year the people in the town would dress up in these colonial costumes and would do these American Revolutionary War re-enactments. In fact, it really didn't matter what your ethnicity was. They even ask my mother to dress up like Betsy Ross because she fit the costume, not because there was any kind of familiar or ethnic link to the American Revolution. So that was my background and I went through school just wanting to be a historian.

I went to college, a small liberal arts Jesuit college in Pennsylvania and majored

in History and Communications and I thought I was actually going to work for *Sports Illustrated* – I was going to be a journalist. But then I really thought that pursuing history was really what I wanted to do. So I pursued my graduate studies at Ohio State University in 1981. I originally wanted to study the American anti-slavery movement. And after I did my master's in 1983, I wanted to quit graduate school.

[0:06:46.2]

INT: Why?

YEE: I had, at that time, a professor whose mentorship I really didn't click with. And so I was thinking, well, what am I going to do? After the summer of defending my master's thesis I really didn't really have any direction. I didn't feel I was getting much support or mentoring from my current advisor. So I thought to myself, well, come September I'll decide. I'll take one more class and if I don't feel that it's going anywhere, I don't know what I'm going to do. I happened to take a graduate seminar from Lois Helmbold who was at Ohio State University, a new professor. And I took her seminar in women's history. And it was at that point that we raised the question, "Why aren't there any Black women written about in the anti-slavery movement in the United States?" And so this professor, this mentor encouraged me and said, "Well, why don't you research that? Why don't you write that?" I went back to who was then my current advisor and I posed the question to him. And he says, "Well, I don't think there were any. I don't think you're going to find anybody." So that, I think, lit the fire under me to pursue this needle in the haystack at that time – in the early '80s – of Black women in the Anti-slavery Movement.

So when I switched my advisor, not to Lois because she had left by that time, but to Leila Rupp who teaches now at UC Santa Barbara, and she became my advisor. Professor Leila Rupp who did Women's History, and totally changed my life, totally changed my attitude towards graduate school. I now became really

enthusiastic about being in school and totally encouraged me to do any kind of research I could possibly do on Black women in the anti-slavery movement. And that's what I did for my dissertation. Eventually that became my first book which I can say that I was proud of, but more importantly, my mother was proud of. It became her coffee table book after I finished it.

When I finished graduate school I kind of went along trying to find a job. And there were no history jobs at that time and certainly no history departments that were interested in Black women abolitionists, or certainly not in an Asian American women doing Black Studies which was really unusual for the time. So after a brief stint doing a replacement position in History at Indiana Purdue University in Fort Wayne, Indiana I realized that I needed to be in a city. And I needed to be in a city where there were more Asian Americans and that was more urban. And certainly to be in a department that valued doing women's history.

And so it just happened that The Chronicle of Higher Education I was reading, searching for jobs and getting all these job rejections, found that what was then Women Studies at the University of Washington was looking for someone doing women's history. And I remember sitting there and it was below zero in my office in Fort Wayne and I was sitting in my winter coat, all depressed, thinking, "Well, should I just—why not? I'll just give it a shot. I have no idea what Women Studies is…"

There was Women's Studies at Ohio State but I really wasn't ready for it. I was dealing with my own homophobia, dealing with my own career choices, there was just so much going on that I was really immature at that time and hadn't really expanded into doing any interdisciplinary work at all, including Women's Studies. So I gave it a shot, saying, "Well, they want a women's historian, I'll give it a try." And they invited me for an interview. I had to keep looking up where Seattle was in the Atlas. So I drove cross-country, after getting the job, thankfully. Certainly my mother was happy that I would potentially get a job and not have to

move back home.

So that's how I ended up—not ended up, it was really fortuitous. And I really think that unexpected, serendipitous kinds of opportunities open up for us, and it's our decision about whether or not we want to take that step and try it. And I don't know what would have happened if I had not sent in my application saying, "Well, here's my resume, this is what I do. Do you want to take a chance on someone who has no background in Women's Studies but had pretty good training in history and women's history?"

I started out at the age of 29 at University of Washington and I feel like I've grown up here, grown into a more interdisciplinary scholar. I learned interdisciplinarity in Women Studies here by being exposed to an extraordinary group of feminist colleagues. It gave me great insight into my own work. And so when I embarked on my second project, it was the tools, the intellectual tools that my colleagues had given me through themselves and readings and teaching that allowed me to expand my horizons. And I consider myself a women's historian still, but I also think of myself as someone who does the history of race and ethnicity in the U.S., Urban History, Gender in U.S. History, it's just totally expanded my horizons as a scholar and a teacher.

[0:13:14.7]

INT: Great. What were those first classes like that you were teaching?

YEE: Those first classes were tough because in graduate school at that time – and things are beginning to change now, a little bit – they did not teach you how to teach. You had some TA experience, but beyond leading sections—Ohio State History department at that time was a very traditional history department. And so we did not have the kind of teaching opportunities that our graduate students in the PhD program here have. And so I would say the first three years was a trial by fire and learning how to lecture, learning how to write exams, very basic skills that go into

becoming a teacher and a young professor.

I was totally blown away by the caliber of the students here at UW, in terms of just the analytical tools that Women Studies students had. And at that time, until 1993 I think it was, we did not have an independent major. Students who wanted to quote unquote "major" in Women Studies had to major in General Studies, with a concentration in Women Studies. So institutionally we've had to figure out ways in which we could exist in an institution that was very non-traditional, even in the late 1980s, early 1990s.

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INT: So that seems like it was a pretty big transition, switching from General Studies to Women Studies. What other kinds of transitions were there? And what was the community like on campus in terms of supporting those kinds of transitions?

YEE: It depends on what kinds of communities you're talking about. The Deans that we had when I was coming in were very supportive of strengthening the institutional base of Women Studies. So to go from being a concentration, to being a full-fledged major was a big deal. And we also then had to become department status. So institutionally, we had to have support of Deans in the right places. That is not to say that we didn't have a lot of challenges, too, because whenever there was a budget crisis and any talk of shutting down departments, we always had to look behind our shoulders and know that there was someone suggesting that, once again, Women Studies should be on the chopping block. So it's always been a struggle to articulate the value of what we do, intellectually and in terms of teaching.

I was a first woman of color faculty line in the department, so that was a milestone in 1988 for Women Studies. Women Studies had had part time lecturers and students from other departments involved in the teaching, but had not yet had a tenure line for a woman of color in the department. So that was a big transition.

We were also, even in those early years, talking about quote unquote "internationalizing" or becoming transnational. But like other Women's Studies departments and programs around the country, we didn't quite know what that would look like. It's very U.S. based. And so it was not going to be an even process, but it was certainly going to be an enriching and challenging one, that was for sure.

[0:17:34.6]

INT: What were some important political and social issues at your time of coming in and maybe throughout since you've been here? Or more current issues that you feel like you are really focusing on?

YEE: In the early days, from my memory now, in the early '90s, there was a very, very strong push to deepen the curriculum and scholarship on intersectionality. *This Bridge Called My Back* was not that old when I came to UW. I think it was less than ten years old as a publication at that time. Ruth Frankenberg had come in the same year I did and I learned so much from her, in terms of how to marshal together scholarly and activist work around anti-racism. And so that was a gigantic undertaking. And it's something that has taken many forms, but still resonates with us today. There was always dealing with homophobia towards Women Studies. So sexuality, I think, as a part of something called Queer Studies is relatively new, especially for UW in terms of developing a very deep, scholarly and teaching archive, and having the faculty to be able to teach different dimensions of sexualities.

Oh and there is another one, how could I forget this? Off and on, until we did change our name, there was a great debate nationally and within our department about whether or not to change the name to Gender Studies. And I actually, in my naïve moments, thought that that was not such a bad idea until I engaged in very serious debate with scholars on this campus, but also nationally, about the

implications for that. And what I realized is that one of the risks is the disappearance of women, the word "woman." And upon reflection, and I've written about this as well, I thought that it was poignant and telling that it would be so easy to disappear the word "woman" as a subject, an object, of analysis, whether men do the analysis or women. And at that time we were working primarily with binaries, in those early days.

When I realized that: well, what would be the consequences of losing the term "woman" as a political move but also as a scholarly endeavor? I think that a lot of women, especially, were drawn to our department because there was nothing on campus in other departments that focused or valued women, or gender at all, as a category of analysis. A lot of the history of Women Studies is recuperative – recuperating the experiences, desires, perspectives of women as part of a larger category of gender. And what the term "woman" didn't signal right away to people, is how comparative it always was for scholars. Anybody who did women's history, anybody who did anything having to do with women in Social Sciences or Humanities, rarely studied women in a vacuum, it was always within a larger, complicated social context. So to risk losing the term "woman," even though it may have been politically savvy, I think would have been a great detriment.

I also realized that you didn't have to be a feminist to Gender Studies. Anybody could do Gender Studies. It didn't necessarily signal a commitment to social justice or anti-racism, or anti-sexism or anti-oppression of any kind. And so those debates and those struggles had us hang on to the name Women Studies. And it was, as Sue-Ellen Jacobs has articulated as one of the founders of our department, the department was deliberately named "Women" without the apostrophe, in the face of the more common trend across the country which was to have the apostrophe. Because our idea was that women were the object of analysis and that it was open to any student, regardless of gender identification, to study women. We believed that it was important for the world to study women. But then, by the

mid-2000s the field had changed. And what became very clear was that there are plenty of feminist scholars who were doing Queer, Gender, Sexuality, Feminist Studies. So the name change really reflected that broadening of interests without losing the social justice component of what we did – which is really the core, the heart and soul of the department.

[0:23:22.6]

INT: You brought in feminism a little bit in saying that you don't need to be a feminist to do these studies. What has been your experience with the word "feminism"? Did you call yourself a feminist at the beginning? Was that ever a harsh word for you? What's your experience of that?

YEE: I have called myself a feminist since my late twenties. A large part because my dissertation advisor is a feminist and the people I hung around with, my cohort in graduate school, who were also advisees of Leila Rupp were also feminists. So it really opened my eyes and demythologized that word. Because I grew up in the late '60s, early '70s when the first media promoted backlash against feminism started to really make the headlines. So I saw all those negative—the bra burners, man hating associations, and certainly the homophobia within me and my whole community and family was an obstacle growing up towards that word. But being among feminists, I really grew and matured and opened my eyes to what really was facing many societies around the world in terms of the violence against women and the inequalities, that's what really turned my head.

What I was slower to come to terms with, as a feminist however, was my own class privilege. I saw the oppressions of being a woman of color and a woman and a person of color in the world but I had been so sheltered because of middle class upbringing that – even though my parents had grown up poor – I had no sense of class consciousness at all, until I came to UW as an assistant professor and I learned, late, about my own privilege. So it's an evolution, evolving as a feminist, but the components of it evolving unevenly.

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INT: Are there any really good last stories or anything that you really want to share to be on here?

YEE: Well, in 2014 – I'll share a little story. How things have changed, particularly with regard to sexualities, at least from what I've been able to see. When I was back East visiting my family this past Spring, my niece, who is six and a half, and we were coloring, and she looked at my left finger which has a ring on it, and she says, "Aunt Shirley, are you married?" And I said, "Yes." And she says, "To who?" and I said, "Well, Aunt Diane." And she looks at me and says, "Are you a girl?" and I said, "Yes." "So how come girls can marry girls?" I said, "Well it depends on what state you live in." And she said, "Well, could you marry a boy?" I said, "Well, if I wanted to. But I didn't want to." And she said, "Oh." And then we went back to coloring. And that is hopefully the next generation's view of change. Nothing, it's no big deal.

INT: That's great. That will probably be a story that she will remember.

YEE: I hope so. One wonders, but you never know.

INT: Great, well thank you so much.

YEE: Thank you, it was a pleasure.

INDEX / TAGS