**Interview with Regina Lee**

**“The Body Exists Online: Feminist Pedagogy and Digital Project Creation”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today’s episode, “The Body Exists Online,” is an interview with Regina Lee. Regina is an Associate Teaching Professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2017, Regina received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities. Over the course of that summer, she developed a course titled “Feminist New Media Studies,” which she taught for the first time in the fall of 2017. Our conversation explores, among other things, the pedagogical implications of the risks of online content creation, the visibilization of the labor of public scholarship as labor, and the intersections of antiracist feminist pedagogy and public pedagogy.

…

ANNIE DWYER: Thanks so much for joining me, Regina.

REGINA LEE: Thanks for having me.

ANNIE DWYER: To begin, I'm wondering if you can just say a little bit more about the conceptualization of “Feminist New Media Studies.” What were some of the major learning goals? What were some of the organizing questions? How would you characterize the investigative arc of the course?

REGINA LEE: One of the major things that I wanted to do with this [course] was talk about a field that has been around for quite some time. I'm talking about new media studies in general. One of the major things that I wanted to bring to my students' attention is that the body exists online–thinking about their own positionalities, their race, class, and gender for referring to the kind of matrices of domination, oppression, and privilege that Patricia Collins brings up.

Then the students have to think about, how does this happen online? What constructs this body in this online space? What does it look like to think about producing scholarship and producing media objects from that space? And how are they received into the structures that already exist?

Because so much of online research tends to consider its default user somehow disembodied or virtualized, I wanted to make clear that the feminist frameworks that are used for offline analyses of say, intersectional privilege oppression, really also apply in online positionalities. That was one of the things that was animating what I was trying to do.

ANNIE DWYER: That sounds so fascinating. I'm wondering, as you were talking about how a querying of the offline stakes of online content creation organizes this class, to give folks a little bit more of a sense of how you did that…. What were some of the major assignments? How did you scaffold that learning through the kind of work that you gave to students?

REGINA LEE: Sure. The core assignment of the course was a linked duology called Methods I and Methods II. I think I would actually make it three assignments now and spread them out a little bit more over the course of the quarter. Potentially doing away entirely with the final paper, though. The purpose of the whole course's assessment was to mimic some of the processes that academics will go through in the production, distribution, and analysis of digital objects. But, because I wanted to make clear to the students that what they were doing was not just analyzing from a distance but participating closely (and had been already participating) in these publics, I also asked them to make a digital object.

So Methods I comprises two sections. Methods I-A is digital autoethnography. This is an explanation of where they personally come from in their online experiences, in their participation in new media projects, digital publics, consumption of these things, participation in these things. It was somewhat simple analysis. They have to present a couple of avatars that they used in the past and talk about where they came from, what those indicate about who they were at those times, how those were relevant to or dissociated from the bodies that they had at the time...and a little bit about what they see now in light of some of the early readings that we've done. The whole purpose of that was a self-reflexive analysis that places their own experiences as a scholarly object, which isn't always the case depending on the branch of scholarship that they were engaged in depending on the field that they're in.

Out of that first section was Methods I-B, which was the creation of a digital object. The proposal at that point is supposed to be very small–keep the scope as small as possible. It was supposed to emerge out of that autoethnographic analysis from the previous assignment. The examples that I gave were things like a complex new Avatar, a single vlog entry, perhaps a vid of some kind or even a hashtag…and see what happens. Then they had to go through a timeline and think about distribution methods, and what it is that they wanted to make and then release into the wild.

I do want to note here that I would never run this with undergraduates. This was something that I ran with graduate students and I had some misgivings about (which I discussed extensively, especially with the graduate students in the summer workshop) because I'm concerned for the safety of my junior colleagues who were perhaps entering the digital object creation kind of sphere for the first time and don't know what to expect from it.

But I genuinely believed, and, I think, still believe, that it's a useful experiment to have an artifact that you create, release, and then analyze…not least because multiple students were saying, “Yeah, our departments, or our advisors, or our field in general, is advising that we produce these things and have digital portfolios, and yet isn't contextualizing them for us or helping us understand how to do them.”

I suppose aspects of this were practical and professional in that some students could go on to use what they created as part of their digital portfolios if they felt so inclined. And yet other really fascinating dynamics emerged in that some of my students were already participants in large online publics. So, what they did was create objects that return to those publics through the extant relationships that they had with them.

ANNIE DWYER: I know so many interesting projects came out of this and there are so many threads I want to pick up on in what you just said. But before we move on could you just say a little bit more about some of the digital objects that students produced?

REGINA LEE: Oh, sure. We have a lot of things that came out of this. If you look at the collective blog post that we all–not all of us, but several of the students and I–wrote together for the Simpson Center after the course was over, you'll see several examples. We had things like specific kinds of participatory transformative works–fan fiction. We had a vlog entry that was–several vlog entries–that were interesting. One that was extremely internally focused that didn't show the student’s face, that was focused on their feet. It was fascinating.

And another that was about language learning, which was also fascinating for different reasons. We had things like webcomics. We had a really interesting program that was created in R [The R Project for Statistical Computing] that gathered a whole bunch of data over a single day and tried to analyze that successfully. And another one that didn't show up in the collective blog post that was haunting. It was a discussion of sexualized violence in classical music productions. The student who created that was at the time a graduate student of music and had a strong reaction to the project, but ended up being grateful that she'd had the opportunity to do it.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. I think in reading that collective blog post I'll just plug that as one of the things in your archive. You can see it on the Simpson Center website. The insights that students shared were so rich and I'm glancing at them right now. I love this quote, “I began”–this is from Naomi Bosch–“I began to envision a great deal of my past fan experience content consumption, which I had considered to be casual, informal, non-academic, as a relevant foundation to my further development as an interdisciplinary scholar.” I love that encapsulation of a student beginning to think about the porousness between academic and non-academic publics which I think your class accomplished so well.

There are so many directions we can go with this, but one thing that's already come up in our conversation is this issue of safety and privacy, particularly when students are engaging with digitally mediated publics. You mentioned that you would only do this class with graduate students. Part of that seemed to be about safety concerns and maturity levels. I wonder if you can speak to that a little more because I know you were so deliberate about this. What are the safety concerns that come up in assigning or tasking students with this kind of work? What are the ethics of assigning public facing work particularly when we're talking about digital publics? And what are some of the protocols that you discussed? Would you do anything differently? What did you learn?

REGINA LEE: Thanks for that great question. As I mentioned previously, I spent a lot of time with the graduate students when it was time to workshop my syllabus for this course. I spent a lot of time speaking to them: “How would this make you feel? Would this make you feel safe? What would you feel a need to protect? What safeguards would you want in place for your colleagues?” …especially because graduate students taking coursework are usually in the first several years, first two to three years of their degrees. I was conscious of not wanting to pigeonhole a scholar, for example, into something that perhaps they had done early in their career. But given the various positionalities occupied by students in classes at UW, I wanted to bring forward–as a pedagogical practice, but also as a feminist analytic–the fact that different students were going to face different kinds of dangers, safeties, things they could expect in online environments. The closer that a student was to the so-called default of being a cis white het masculine presenting person, or the closer they could perform that in online spaces the better off they might be. I had given, in I think the previous year, a small cybersecurity (for lack of a better word) workshop to my department and had gone through “These are the things that we could be facing. Here's what happens when we get paralyzed by the overwhelming amount of things to know, and here are the three things that you can do: have a password manager or at least two factor authentication. Deliberately clean out your accounts online, if you can. And ask for things to be shut down or taken down.” Things like that.

What I found that was fascinating was that, given the relatively homogeneous group of students that I had in that particular cohort, they were shocked at the things that had happened, say, during Gamergate, the things that were happening on campus at that time, things that had happened to some of my undergraduates, which I did have permission to relate to them–that made it clear that some of these things were necessary based on the particular tenor and form of online participation in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 electoral cycle. Given all of those factors, I wanted to make sure that students knew some of the things that had happened in the past and then ways to preempt some of those issues if they were to show up, some of the pleasures and some of the dangers of going anonymous, and protocols to engage if something did happen.

And something did happen. I focused on the proactive preventative measures more, but we did talk about what to do if something happens. And as Abigail Mayhew discusses in that collective blog post she actually had her digital object go viral but not in anglophone spheres online. She is a student in the Jackson School of International Studies and was looking at Kazakh-Russian tensions in that geographic region…long post-colonial history, fascinating work. Part of that process was in the midst of learning Kazakh. Her post was about that process: what it was like, how she was doing in the process. It was narrated in Kazakh and Abby did show her face. As she points out, it was not well-produced, according to her, in that it was a singular camera on her face. Yet it got a lot more traction because of her positionality as an American and as a white woman speaking this language.

But what happened was it got picked up in a number of different Kazakh language media entities and she ended up with something like 16,000 views in 12 hours. And the comments–because of the tensions in the region–were increasingly nationalistic and polarizing.

So, at a certain point, she decided to pull the plug on the video, close down comments, and make the video private so it was no longer viewable. She doesn't talk about this, but I do mention it in the comments: at that point one of the users who had been commenting said, “Oh, I wonder who pulled this. Was it the Americans or was it the Russians?”...which I think just goes to show how far beyond a single graduate student in the state of Washington this post had gone. She does credit our workshop on digital safety parameters with her decision to pull the plug, which I think, given where the comments were going, was probably a good idea.

ANNIE DWYER: Right, right. She speaks in that blog post about the insights she gleaned about the experiences of non-native English speakers who have to deal with the domination of English on social media…and so many other insights about power and privilege. As we're talking, it's so prominent in your framing of the class and the framing of the work that you do with students–the feminist framework and commitments. I'm wondering if you can speak a little more to how feminist anti-racist commitments inform public engagement or public scholarship, what difference does it make? Maybe this is a really obvious question, but I'm guessing you'll take it in interesting directions. When you start from that point, how does that change the way that you do publicly engaged work?

REGINA LEE: Thanks for that question. Again, one of the things that I wanted to do with this course was historicize the online environment–talk about where these structures and platforms come from, who their default user is or who their default users are, and what might come out of that if folks who don't fit those defaults or parameters use those objects or try to release objects into them…and then what some of that friction or dissonance might show us.

One of the things that helped us all get through the stresses of this particular project and that particular historical moment was the creation of a collective–a genuine collective–inside of that classroom, which I had to work hard to create the conditions to have emerge and yet could not actually make happen. Pointing out that “you are each other's safety net, you are each other's resources, you are each other's lifelines, in some ways; if something goes wrong, you have a collective of scholars you can ask for advice” made students able to move beyond some of the safer, potentially more understandably academic work that they might have been encouraged to produce otherwise.

The benefit here is that having that collective at your back means that you can be more daring, a bit more brave. The work that is produced is more public-facing. Having the collective of the classroom, the safe space of the classroom, and the safe space of this assignment, enabled them to go ahead and participate.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. There are so many beautiful things that you said that we could pick up on. I love how you're tying risk-taking to collective work. I never thought of collaboration in that way before. But also, there are so many things that you do in your course design and your assignments to build in a recognition of labor. I wonder if you can tell folks what those things were…how you ask students to reflect on labor.

REGINA LEE: Right. Yeah, that's a great question. Thank you. One of the things I did was curate the readings as carefully as I could to make sure that students could see lines of thought across decades, but also across fields and also across scholars of color who we're speaking into these things who often addressed that question of labor explicitly.

ANNIE DWYER: And you have them estimate the hours, right? The hours...

REGINA LEE: I do. I had them estimate the hours in Methods I. How long did they think it would take? What was the timeline? What would it look like to make this? Of course, this is all hypothetical because for a lot of them they've never done this before. Then in Methods II, I gave them a list of questions. The first one is: Was your initial timeline/weekly estimate for hours spent correct? And pretty much unilaterally it wasn't.

[ANNIE DWYER LAUGHS]

Students had a clear example right there of their initial hypothesis not matching their actual work. Part of this was a scope creep issue. They started off with a project that was small and then it got bigger and bigger because they wanted to do more and more. Isn’t that just the condition of graduate work? But that's beautiful. That's the time when you really should–if you can, if you have the resources–then go for it. But that did mean that their hours spent estimate was not correct.

They had another question about how much care work did they have to do? How much relational cultivation did they have to do? Where was the bulk of their labor? Of course, this varied by project. But several of the students mentioned that the self-care required in the process and the aftermath was significant. When they tallied that as part of their labor they realized, “I've never thought about work in this way. I never thought about the fact that the amount of work I have to do to recover from the work I'm producing is a part of that work.”

So, we had a feminist self-realization moment. The kinds of reproductive labor that are required to produce ourselves over and over again in academic contexts is draining sometimes, to be perfectly frank. But also, the relational cultivation aspect of it–in order to spread something, what kinds of work do you have to do to make it spread? Because it's not necessarily enough to drop an object and then have it take off. That did happen for some students but not a lot of them. They talked about the process of cultivation, the process of checking in, the process of re-posting in different environments, tailoring it to different platforms, that kind of work. Again, not necessarily having contextualized that work as work before, and using that framework to kind of understand it as work, a different kind of work helps students contextualize other parts of their experiences of professionalization, which I think is accurate because what is that except relational cultivation?

ANNIE DWYER: I think it's so brilliant because first of all, if students ever do any kind of collaborative work that's public facing (almost all public-facing scholarship is collaborative in some way), being able to understand their work as labor and develop kind of equitable relationships in that collaborative work is so critical.

And also I think just the task of narrativizing public scholarship as “legitimate, serious work”–to quote Miriamm Bartha–requires students to understand the full scope of their labor when they're doing this kind of work. So, I love that aspect of your pedagogy and your teaching. Also, it seemed to be so much a part of the careful scaffolding that you did in the course. I think a lot of folks who are teaching publicly engaged seminars for the first time often report out on not understanding the full scope of scaffolding needed to successfully prepare students to do certain things. And you do that so well. So, I'm wondering if I can ask you to speak to that? What do you think needs to be scaffolded for an assignment like the digital object creation and analysis assignment?

REGINA LEE: Right. So thank you. Thank you for that. Thank you for noticing the amount of scaffolding that went into this…

[LAUGHS]

ANNIE DWYER: It was incredible.

REGINA LEE: …because quite frankly I think of that as almost the bulk of my work around that particular assignment. It made it much more difficult to run than a less public-facing assignment might have been. One of them was some collective norm setting that we did on the first day of class. I asked them “What are we going to do with portable mobile devices? How are we going to handle it when people have to leave or enter? Can we have food? Do people have ambient allergies that we need to be aware of?” But then also “How are we going to respond to each other in, say, online discussion spaces? What are we going to do if something erupts? How are we going to run the class?” And these are simple logistical questions.

But I think it was useful for students to have a literalization of what it means to be in relation to each other immediately after the discussion of the syllabus scaffolding on that. So I put them in discussion groups: “Who wants to talk about this? Who wants to talk about that? All right.” Then they had to report back to each other. This was time consuming and yet worthwhile because students were able to see that the class was developing based on parameters that they'd set with each other. Several students brought up [that] the idea of being asked to develop these parameters for their peers and with their peers was a level of agency and agential presence in a classroom that they'd never experienced.

ANNIE DWYER: Which is amazing as a graduate student, I think…

REGINA LEE: It was interesting for me...

ANNIE DWYER: …to recognize how little agency you've ever had in establishing a classroom environment.

REGINA LEE: An understanding of positionality that emerges out of that makes this a feminist praxis, a feminist pedagogical praxis. The other one was the initial questionnaire, which, again, I developed in consultation with the students in the Simpson Center summer workshop. This is a version of a questionnaire that I do release to students–have released on a regular basis since I started teaching. But what I did with this one was I had six questions but the first three were only for me. And then the last three were for their peers, for their colleagues in the class. If you go to the document you can actually see that what I'm asking about is how much experience they have in participation in online publics.

I wanted to be really clear with students that if they have this experience and want to share from it I will support them in that, but that we need to put some extra guardrails in place perhaps to have that discussion because this was in the immediate aftermath of Gamergate, which had a fairly long tail and in some ways is still ongoing, not least because what was known as Gamergate became some of the foundations of the social media environment precipitated by the 2016 electoral cycle. In any case, I needed to know if I had someone from that community in the class because that would change some of the parameters and some of the discussions that I would allow to happen. It was a dual-purpose question, that one. And then prior experience in feminist theory so that I knew what I was dealing with.

The foremost concern–because I still dimly remember being a graduate student, and it can be quite daunting to speak about something like that in public, yet this is something that I need to know in order to run the course equitably. (And unsurprisingly most of them were really concerned about that digital object creation.) But say for example, if a student had a concern about their own positionality, or a certain aspect of their identity being revealed or overtly focused on in class, I needed to know that. If a student was working multiple jobs or had parental/familial care duties, I needed to know that as well. So that’s what that is there to do. It's so that they can have a forum in which to address me privately without necessarily having to make a whole big deal out of it. It was really interesting having them record that and then having them refer back to that document at the end of the course.

ANNIE DWYER: We do a lot of work sometimes around being more responsive to what unfolds in the classroom. And there's so much you can do in terms of trying to engineer a more egalitarian space, and these are such useful practical tips for doing that. Thank you so much. Thanks so much for joining me today. I have learned so much from my conversation with you and I'm sure other people will, too.

REGINA LEE: Thank you very much. I appreciate this conversation, as well.

…

ANNIE DWYER: This episode of *Going Public* was made possible with help from the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities staff, particularly, C. R. Grimmer, who is also the Communications Manager at the Simpson Center; our sound editor, Oliver Gordon; and of course, support from The Mellon Foundation. The Mellon initiative at the Simpson Center, *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration* was led by Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Mellon initiative, Director of the Simpson Center, and UW Professor of English; Rachel Arteaga, Assistant Director of the Simpson Center and Associate Program Director of the Mellon initiative, and myself, Annie Dwyer, Assistant Program Director of the Mellon initiative. We hope you check out additional episodes of *Going Public* on our website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic) and wherever you get your podcasts.