

Interviewee: Ina Seethaler (IS), Director of Women's and Gender Studies at CCU

Interviewers: Valerie McLaurin (VM); Alli Crandell (AC); Tripti Pillai (TP)

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Transcribed by Valerie McLaurin 11/2018

VM: (0:55) So we're at a beginning phase of everything still, we kind of got through some theoretical work that we were doing and we just started our first round of interviews. The tentative title right now is "Trans Stories of the South." We are really focusing on the local community as well as other community members. Everyone feel free to jump in if you have any extra questions. You've done the release form, so if you could start by introducing yourself and telling us a little about yourself.

IS: I'm Ina Seethaler. I am the Director of Women's and Gender Studies on campus. This is my third year, yay. I'm in charge of teaching our upper level Women's and Gender Studies courses. I'm the only full time person in the program. I also do the advising and put on events for our students and our minors, and the whole campus really. I really see my job as fostering conversation about gender on campus and all its implications. And so anything related to the trans community is obviously is very dear to my heart, and whatever I can do to help support conversations and support the community – that's literally my job, but also my passion. So I'm very happy to be here.

VM: So as the Director I'm not really familiar with what role do you have in control over the curriculum and the type of classes that are offered?

IS: Yeah, I have all the control. Well, I guess I naively think that I have control over it. But I am certainly the one who designs new classes and kind of pushes them through. I don't know how much you all know about how classes get designed or approved. Any faculty member can come up with a new class, develop the syllabus, and then there's a lot of different steps and an approval process that they have to go through. So, they have to be approved by your chair first, then your dean, then your college, and then a representation of campus. What we call Faculty Senate. So, there's a lot of different kind of hoops you have to jump through. Sometimes there can be a little bit of pushback. As an example, I designed a class on feminist activism and some people had a concern that my students would be getting course credit for political activism on campus. I think that as I propose classes specifically in Women's and Gender Studies that I always need to be prepared that there might be some pushback. Because again, we still need to have a lot of conversations about gender and sexuality and race and class. So, there's definitely a need for classes and for those kind of conversations.

VM: How were you able to characterize that class?

IS: Well it's always a good idea to connect it to student learning outcomes which is what we're all about (laughing). So, I made it very clear, I defined what activism was, so you know just let's say fundraising for a political party is not really feminist activism because it's not trying to change a system of oppression or injustice. And then I made very clear that students' projects come out of the readings that we do all semester long about examples of feminist activism,

historical readings, but also you know readings about what is feminism and what is activism. And that seemed to be okay.

VM: More specifically about the relationship between the program, Women's and Gender Studies, and the topic of trans, I'm familiar with the coursework but I didn't do my undergrad here so as far as the coursework that's offered in Women's and Gender Studies how many topics about trans are presented in the coursework?

IS: In our core classes which are essentially taught by two teaching associates or adjuncts, they teach our intro courses, and then I teach the upper level courses. In those classes I meet with the teaching associates and I make it very clear that the trans community needs to be a part of all of those classes. Whatever we discuss, it needs to be a heavy focus. So, I know Valerie you took the pop culture class with me, obviously it's always hard to if you're trying to cover let's say all of pop culture, to talk about individual communities as much as I ideally would like to. But I hope you would agree that we always try to bring in everybody's experiences. And that definitely holds true also for the activism class that I teach and all the intro classes. Then I co-teach with four other faculty members on campus an Intro to LGBTQ studies. That's WGST105, we're teaching that for the second time only in the spring. That definitely is a class that very specifically and consciously talks about the trans community and experiences.

VM: (7:00) Would you ever see having a class just on the topic of trans?

IS: Absolutely, I actually taught an independent study with a student who identifies as trans and he wanted to do an independent study with me and I designed a syllabus, I think we called it "Introduction to Trans Studies" and I would love to teach that on a larger scale as an actual course with more students in it.

VM: How do you see students in your classes reacting to that topic? Is it generally positive, what has your experience been?

IS: I see a lot of ignorance, but not negative ignorance. I don't know how to describe it, it's just that honestly, they think they have never met a trans person. It's just something that they have never thought about. So, I personally haven't really experienced in my classes a lot of bias of hatred or negative pushback. But I will also say that students usually self-select. The ones that come into my classes, right? I would say it's fairly unlikely that a student who has very strong anti-trans sentiments would voluntarily take a Women's and Gender Studies class. So I can imagine that that might look very different if you asked another instructor or a professor who doesn't specially teach in Women's and Gender Studies. But usually there's an openness, students do want to learn, there's definitely just some misunderstandings but in any of my classes we always start our trying to understand the difference between sex, our biology and what we're born with, and gender, how we're socialized and how we're supposed to be behaving based on our body parts. And we just make it very clear that there is, in feminist understandings of the world, a very clear distinction that they're not connected. And biology isn't destiny. So I think that that also helps in kind of preparing them to think about trans issues in a little bit more of an informed manner. Again, they seem willing to learn, most of the time.

VM: I don't know much about this but I was reading 2014 USC and the College of Charleston had funding cuts because they were teaching an LGBTQ course. So, is that something on the state level you're thinking about?

IS: (10:00) I hadn't heard about those, I should probably really look into those. So far I haven't had to interact with the state much. Because when you propose a new class it doesn't need to be approved by the state. However, I just submitted a proposal to create a Women's and Gender Studies major, and that would include for example the Intro to LGBTQ studies course and things like that. So that would be brought to the state's attention I suppose for the first time. I very much expect pushback, not even just talking about specifically trans studies, I am expecting pushback against Women's and Gender Studies because of the place where we live. I expect them to question, there's only two Women's and Gender Studies majors in the state – at the College of Charleston and at USC. But I very much expect them to ask why we would need another major in the state, you know 'What is it good for anyways?' There's been a news story that got quite a bit of attention, I don't know if you all saw it. Hungary, the country, just completely abolished all gender studies programs. Very much with the political pushback of saying, "Well, this is supposedly nonsense and this is not scientific, and this is political propaganda" or something like that. Even within the US we've seen a lot of pushback against ethnic studies programs, against gender studies programs. We have a National Women's Studies Association Conference every November and it almost sometimes turns into a consciousness raising session because there's so many programs who are experiencing funding cuts who are not allowed to hire additional people, additional faculty. So, I'm prepared, I'm expecting it, I'm hoping that I'll have enough information to pushback in an informed way and we'll see.

VM: Specifically, on the trans topic, [can you compare] your past experience at other universities to Coastal?

IS: (12:20) The last job I had was at a Jesuit university in St. Louis. And honestly the situation wasn't much different because it had such an intense affiliation with the Catholic church. In many ways it was even a little more intense unfortunately. So even though that was a private research university in a big liberal city, and here we're at a teaching institution, more rural and in the South, the setting was in many ways very similar. We didn't have any kind of trans specific class only on trans experiences there. We didn't have an Intro to LGBTQ studies there. I think right before I left we tried an Intro to Sexuality Studies course, so making it a little broader, and I'm not sure that it filled. They do have a major there, though. You also couldn't have any kind of events about abortion or reproductive justice really at all. However, I know that there are other institutions where there are a lot of courses specifically on trans experience and the trans community and that is really exciting. Because I'm hoping not to be the only person in the program anymore soon, I keep checking the job listings that other institutions are putting out and I'm seeing a lot of institutions hiring faculty specifically with an LGBTQ and trans focus, both in their teaching and in their research. It really is, maybe not here, and maybe not at certain institutions, but I think nationally and internationally there is a big push in Women's and Gender Studies to hire more folks with that kind of focus, which is exciting.

VM: Here on campus, with your experience with trans students, do you think they are afforded an equal access to education? How do you feel about Coastal with trans students?

IS: (14:58) Yeah, not being a trans person, I don't like making assumptions or assessments. But I will talk about—I like to check in with our trans students and keep asking them how they think they are being perceived. From our conversations I think that they feel welcome in a sense that most of them come from homes or home communities where they absolutely were not accepted. So Coastal really is their home, and they very much feel that things are going much better here than how they were going at home. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that things are perfect here, it just means that they are better than the really horrible experiences that they've experienced within their families or their high schools. Sometimes it doesn't take much to make that experience even just a little bit better. I know there's some issues that keep coming up every time, and the biggest one I think is the inability to have their names come up on official school documents. Their birth names are listed on Webadvisor, Moodle, their e-mails. I've had conversations with the registrar's office and apparently there's not that much they can do because these systems rely on legal documents. The suggestion is always "well the student should just have their names changed legally." But of course, that involves a lot of money that students often times don't have, many of these students might not be officially out to their parents, so they don't have the option to change their names. And frankly they might not be at that point yet where they have fully made that transition and are at the point where they are going to completely leave behind parts of their identity. I think often times that gets kind of proposed as this great, easy solution, when really, it's not. And that I really see as the biggest issue—the usage of names. There are apparently some professors on campus who will absolutely refuse to use students' names, right? [Names] that don't go along with the ones that are printed on paper. I'd love to have conversations with these professors. If you know one, that's what I'm here for. But that is obviously a horrible position to put a student into, to out them like that possibly, and also just complete disregard of who they are really. Overall, I think that Coastal's really trying hard. I'm not sure if you're going to be chatting with Franklin Ellis for example in Intercultural Student Services, I think that they're really emphasizing the trans community and are very, very conscious in their programming and in the kind of support that they provide. As an example, at my previous institution we did not have gender neutral bathrooms or restrooms. This was done right before I came here, so I've only heard rumors that this was done by one person and they decided that they were going to push this through which is really great. Sometimes it just takes one person with some power who can just go in and make those changes. But there's still definitely room for improvement.

VM: Speaking of organizations on campus, I know there is SAGE but are there other people or organizations on campus that you know of?

IS: Yeah, so PRIDE, what does the acronym stand for? I'll have to look that one up. But it's the PRIDE organization which is the LGBTQ+ organization on campus and they are a really, really great group. They were heavily involved in for example trying to bring the drag show to campus which unfortunately had to get cancelled. I really hope that we'll find the means to reschedule because of the kind of historical and cultural value that this event has within the LGBTQ community. They're trying to put on events, they meet once a week, and they actually have a really large group. Allies are invited too, they can absolutely be a part of the group and events.

SAGE as you mentioned obviously, it stands for Gender Equality so they are actually right now at Love Your Body Day and they are offering information on chest binding and bra sizing. Which I thought was a really cool idea. They're trying to be really conscious of trans experiences as well. Intercultural Student Services, Women's and Gender Studies, the Dean of Students office I know is very sensitive to those kinds of issues. Obviously, they deal more with the if something happened kind of side to offer support, so not that much in terms of like necessarily education or programming to prevent incidents. Those are the main organizations that I can think of. I think counseling is trying, they're involved with—oh Safe Zone, we have a Safe Zone committee on campus. We offer Safe Zone training, it's me, Franklin, Dr. Jenkot in Sociology and then a number of people in counseling. So they are all trained in Safe Zone and specifically in trans experiences, but maybe if you've ever been to counseling or you can probably imagine that it's a resource that is heavily in demand and probably can't offer as much support as they would like to because they're chronically understaffed which has been the case at every institution that I've ever worked at. But counseling would be another good resource too.

Alli Crandell: (22:20) [inaudible] Coastal kind of the atmosphere that you're describing, it's like you mentioned we're in a rural space and community. As a member of this kind of region, how would you compare the atmosphere when you step off campus as when you step on?

IS: Again, speaking as an ally, my experiences are different. I know that. But I like to compare it to my self identification as a feminist. When I step off campus as a feminist I do feel uncomfortable most of the time. Obviously, there's a big difference. I usually don't feel any fear for my safety usually, unless it's in my identity as a woman. But you know you see a lot of Trump stickers, trucks, yard signs... around. You have a lot of churches around. You have a lot of church affiliated events. And not that every church is anti-LGBTQ, I attend a church that is very much very open. But I think historically the kinds of churches that we know are in this area tend to not be supportive and that's also what I hear from my students. I can only imagine that it's probably not a very supportive environment that they step into off campus. Again, coming from St. Louis one big difference of course that we had was in St. Louis yes campus was often times very conservative in a Catholic spirit, but you would go off campus where you were in this metropolitan liberal city and there were tons of LGBTQ support groups. We would send a lot of our students to do internships at all of these queer affiliated organizations and it was wonderful. And here, as far as I know, we really only have one organization that is kind of queer focused, but I think they're more focused on like businesses. It seems more like a very adult organization, and business focused, instead of just a support group or a group where students would feel welcome. I want to clarify, just because I just caught myself, when I say queer I just want to clarify that I'm not using that in a derogatory way but as kind of a broad term to cover the whole LGBTQ+ community. So yeah, that's kind of my assessment of the community. I'm sure that students or really anybody that identifies as trans on campus, you know it's not just students, that they would find a family or a community of their own and they wouldn't have to deal with too much harassment on a daily basis. But, I mean going to a grocery store—I had a student on campus share with me that she would go to Cino and get food and there was one particular employee who would consistently call her by the wrong pronouns even though the student stayed very polite and just asked, "Could you please call me so-and-so?" and the employee just refused. And eventually the student told Franklin, and Franklin asked for a meeting with the employee and the head of dining services, and I don't think that it ever really changed. So, if this is

happening on campus I can only imagine what folks might experience going to the regular grocery store here, or going to a restaurant. I guess my assessment would be I imagine that it can be tough.

AC: Would you say that students check in with you as the Director of Women's and Gender Studies probably more than other colleagues that might be in—

IS: yes, I would assume so and I really, really welcome that. And I make sure to reach out to them and check in with them as well. I think that Franklin really also is the go-to person on campus and I don't think he gets enough credit for that so I'm putting that on record right now. And that also makes a lot of sense to me since he is part of the community as well, and so he can speak from experience more than I can, certainly also as a black man. I do consider myself often times kind of the go-to person for that and that's great, that's what I'm here for.

Tripti Pillai: (28:30) So thank you for this, one of the questions that came to me very early as you were talking was around ignorance and it seems to me that both faculty and students and everyone, staff, might not be comfortable with trans as a definition or a category, and I was wondering what you and others might do in order to make trans identity prominent? If there was something that we can do to make trans awareness more part of the everyday fabric of the university, what kind of things do you envision say for future projects that come out of your program but also of the university as a whole?

IS: Any way to normalize conversations about gender I think would be very helpful. The parallel I always like to draw is we don't talk about whiteness, we just assume that whiteness isn't a skin color. We assume that blackness or being of Asian descent—that's a color. But whiteness isn't a color, because we've normalized it. That's the norm, so we don't talk about it. If we did the same with critically questioning being cis-gender, and I know a lot of people because we're still at that stage in conversations that think it's ridiculous that we have this word "cis" or you know, "you're just making up categories now." But I think it's really, really important to understand that no—if you're cis, that's not just "normal." That is still something that is part of your identity and we need terms for that. So that would make trans less seemingly abnormal if we normalized those conversations. If we all brought our pronouns up in conversations or every time we introduce ourselves, if we just normalize that kind of focus on gender my hope would be that that would really take the focus or the labeling of abnormality away from the trans community. So, if the president of the university introduced himself at every speech, "I am so-and-so, my pronouns are he/him/his." That could really change the conversations that we have on campus. I guess that would be my main thought. Anything we could do, any ideas ya'll might have, on how to normalize conversations about gender and actually having conversations about gender I suppose, I think can really help with this.

TP: I have another question (laughter). So, I'm thinking of what you suggested, if people in positions of authority were to embrace the ethics of trans awareness and gender awareness that can really have a trickle-down affect across the university. But I'm thinking beyond the university, one of the challenges I imagine is that the university works in isolation as an oasis and outside no matter where if it's in Chicago, if it's out here, the university has a sort of baggage that is attached to it for being elite and exclusive. What might we do as an activist, as a

feminist, I'm sure you have encountered these in other circumstances? What might we do to take awareness to the streets in a way that's not going to have knee jerk reactions, or what in your estimation can work?

IS: Usually I would say reaching out to organizations or reaching out to churches. Reaching out to institutions, schools. I'll be honest in saying that I haven't tried that here, I feel like I haven't lived here long enough in the South to understand whether that would be welcomed or not. But I do think that what we're already doing is inviting community members to come to campus. But I'm not sure that that is necessarily working well. So, we have, I don't know if ya'll know this, what is OLLI called?

TP: Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

IS: Okay it's like a lifelong taking classes for older folks, retirees. Again, I think again they very much self-select the kinds of events that they go to. A couple of them have shown up at movie screenings maybe, even though we always extend an invitation, but I never expect a lot of them at conversations that are geared towards the LGBTQ community for example. So clearly that is a really great idea I'm just not sure if we're looking a huge community on the outside if that's doing what we need to be doing. So, I think us going out and having conversations with people would be very effective and I would imagine that some groups might actually be welcoming or would like the idea, it's just a matter of finding them. And then of course the danger is always you don't want to put your students into a situation where they then are going to be harassed or attacked so it's just a really precarious situation, but I would think that that would be the way to do it. So, if anybody knows of any institutions or organizations that you think would welcome someone to share their experiences that would be great. We could set something up.

AC: A quick follow up to that, you mentioned that Women's and Gender Studies has a lot of public facing events that are published in the Cultural Arts calendar etc. would you say that other than the OLLI members is there community participation in those situations? Do you remember a tense situation that may have happened? What's the makeup of the events for the conversations rather than the movie screenings?

IS: It's overwhelmingly our students.

AC: Okay fabulous.

IS: Which is really, really great and we have had good turnout at the events which I'm very happy about. Sometimes depending on the event—because there are organizations that we collaborate with very closely like the Rape Crisis Center in town for example—members of that organization will come or bring their trainees. So that is probably the biggest non-student body that we get, and then there are the occasional OLLI folks. In terms of tense moments, I will say that we showed last year as part of our Feminist Film Series a documentary about abortion and that was one that I was very worried about. But it turned out, and there were a couple of I think they were OLLI affiliated folks, older folks. An older man raised his hand and I was like, "This is it! It's happening!" (laughter) but he just wanted to learn more. He was very open, and I think his question was how this connects to the patriarchy or a male dominated system, so a very good

question. Other than that, we had an event once where we talked about the wage gap and discrimination that women experience in the work force, how women might negotiate and how women might negotiate a higher salary, why they are less likely to do so, why they might be less successful in doing so. And again, an older gentleman raised his hand and just explained to us that he didn't think that women should be speaking up or be aggressive, but then he clarified that he also didn't think that men should be that way. But, you know, considering all this, those are the two where I'm like, "Okay. That's fine." I sometimes get random calls from people in the community, so someone called me to tell me that some republican governor's wife is the most educated first lady and not Michelle Obama, and I was like, "Okay, thank you for calling! I hope to see you at one of our events at some point." (laughter) But I certainly have not been identified yet by the community outside of Coastal as the gender expert that they need to call up to make complaints about politics or whatever. I'd love to have more involvement with the community because I can totally understand this perception of Coastal as elite, all these kinds of rumors, we're turning you all into liberal snowflakes or whatever. But I actually get where this comes from, I'm a first-generation student. I went to college in Germany where we addressed people with Mr./Professor/Doctor and their last name, so I totally get that we have this image attached to us and I'd love to do something about it. I just don't know how to reach people. Sometimes we have a problem getting students to come to our events because they're a little bit of apathy, but of course everybody's really busy. But I can only imagine what people off campus are thinking about coming to our events.

TP: I have many more questions (laughter) but we only have like seven more minutes and I don't want to colonize the questioning.

AC: (40:45) (inaudible) One of the students you mentioned that self-identified as trans and said that this is their home. Where did they come from, are they in state students or out of state students, do you know?

IS: I think most of them are in state students, now that I think about it. I think so, the ones that I can think of.

TP: You brought up apathy and I was thinking of a slightly different thing with a lot of critics of the trans activism that is burgeoning now, and it is an international and global burgeoning, but a lot of critics of that say that it distracts from more urgent political causes such as women's wages and what they tend to do, or what I have experienced, is that they tend to guise their opposition and criticism in a sort of rivaling political and social justice cause and again from your experiences as a feminist, as an activist and an academic, I was wondering how do you transcend those polarizations that are—

IS: Yeah I mean that is a really, really effective way to make people shut up, right? You're saying, "Your experiences don't matter, this is more important" and we've seen this historically. In the Civil Right Movement women were told, "We're focusing on race right now, this is most important thing, this is not your time." Or, women in the US are told constantly, that's what I'm told constantly, "Issues like the wage gap aren't really important, we need to focus on female genital mutilation, that's really what's important. People over there have it so much worse, what are you complaining about?" So it's a really effective way of trying to turn it into oppression



olympics and say really we need to focus on who are the most oppressed people. And that's just not how that works, that's what I tell people. That's why we have the concept of intersectionality. You can't divide up your identity and say, "Today, I'm just going to be a white person and I'm just going to focus on this." Or, "Today I'm just going to be a middle-class person and I'm just going to focus on economic issues." That's just not how lived experiences work. So, it's really dangerous to weigh those kinds of experiences and the oppression that we live with because it can be used to just say your experiences are not valid and we don't care about your problems, and we value other people's experiences much more. And the reality is that often times they still don't care about those kinds of issues, they're just using it, very bluntly, to make people shut up and take away a platform to voice their concerns. I mean who's in the position to say that this is the most important issues right now? Like, who gets to be in charge to make that kind of decision and make that call? So, when I don't go on a rant about this, I just usually try to explain why any kind of activism we do needs to be intersectional. Whether it's feminist activism or any kind of issue you really care about, you need to look at it through an intersectional lens, you need to look at all the identity markers that make us who we are to really understand our experiences with oppression and privilege. Otherwise you're always going to exclude people and you're always going to declare certain issues more important than others when that's really not how that works. If you're really looking for equality and fighting for social justice, then that's the approach that we need to take.

AC: (inaudible)

TP: Three minutes! (laughter)

AC: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think would be important or that you would like to share before you go?

IS: I just really want to thank you all for working on this project. Really it personally really means a lot to me, and I know that the students that I've talked to about this project are very, very excited because they really feel that while they might not necessarily be openly discriminate against on campus, they certainly don't feel like their experiences are really valued or are really an open part of our community. My research is in life writing, so I study specifically immigrant women's autobiographies and memoirs, because I argue that I'm in a position of privilege where I can offer a platform to have these voices heard. And I always like to make the distinction that I'm not giving these people a voice, they have a voice, right? But whatever we can do to establish a platform to actually have these voices hear, because of the research that I do and because of my activism I just really firmly believe that what you're doing is really important and there is incredible power in sharing stories and in listening to people and then making those stories available to others. That really can have just a super transforming power socially, personally, politically. So, I just want to thank you for what you're doing, I'm super excited about it.