YouSpeak Radio Episode 3 – “HISTORY IS A POWERFUL TOOL” WITH DR. AMY SUEYOSHI

Audio Transcript

Youspeak Introduction:
This is Youspeak Radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund. A project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.

[MUSIC]

Madeline:
I'm Madeline. I'm a rising junior in high school, in the San Francisco Bay Area, about to start a position on my local LGBTQ center's, youth advisory board, and I identify as Asian-American and queer.

I interviewed, Amy Sueyoshi, Provost of, uh, San Francisco State University. They've done a lot of research about queer history and taught courses about, ethnic studies and gender and sexuality studies.

Amy:
Queer history to me is a site of empowerment, right? Not just because of the ways, activists and artists changed society, but also in the ways that queers endured so much, right, back in the day. Before I was a young baby dyke, I realized after many decades, if not centuries, of great struggle these folks endured in order to create a better life for me.

Madeline:
It was really inspiring to meet someone with a similar identity as mine and who faced similar marginalizations, but had also grown up in a completely different time, yet still ended up so successful and confident in their identity nowadays.
I took away from this conversation like a sense of gratitude that all these queer trailblazers before us, paved the way with their accomplishments to creating a more peaceful world that me and other queer youth can now live in.

Trevor:

This episode contains mentions of derogatory terms against queer and trans people, and Asian Americans. Please take care while listening.

[MUSIC]

Amy:

My name is Amy Sueyoshi. I'm actually from the Bay Area also. I'm nonbinary, and I also identify as Asian-American and queer. I'm currently the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at San Francisco State University. I'm also the founding co-curator of the GLBT History Museum in the Castro in San Francisco.

Madeline:

To jump right in with my first question, what was your childhood like?

Amy:

I grew up the first five years in San Francisco, and then my dad got a job in Sunnydale, so we had to move. We moved to San Mateo because, my mom was still had, like, a few jobs that she was cobbbling together in San Francisco, and then she later got a job in Palo Alto, but what that meant was there was a lot of back and forth between San Mateo and San Francisco.

And this was in the seventies and also maybe up to the mid eighties. San Mateo was super white, maybe 20% Asian, which sounds like a lot, but it was actually felt super white, and then San Francisco was super Asian, so there was a way in which I felt alienated in San Mateo, but then when I went to San Francisco and hung out with friends that, I was like, "Whoa, this is how cool it could be to be an Asian," Not that I wanted to be a cheerleader, but, you know, they had Asian-American cheerleaders, which we didn't really have at Aragon High School.

Not that I wanted to be prom queen, but we you know, they had Asian-American prom queens it was just a totally different world, so there was both a realization that my life in San Mateo was not as empowering as it could be, but also, you know, the reality that I could have been living this whole Asian-American life.

I didn't come into my sexuality till my mid-to-late twenties, which is common for women of color of my generation. We faced a lot of pressures in terms of family and things like that, so we're juggling a lot. We're not told to embrace our sexual desire. It's not like something that's on the list of things to do, you know, like practice piano.
So, it's just something that I didn't really, figure out until much later, and I think that the pressure to be heterosexual is so great, right? It's called heteronormativity. You don't even think about other ways of being.

I learned later about the AIDS crisis when I was in high school in the late eighties, but it was also just such a world away.

I was the youngest of three, two older brothers. People will usually say, "Oh, the baby, the only girl, you're spoiled." But in fact, I lived in a pretty, traditional Japanese and Okinawan family where girls are garbage and boys are king.

My brother's got a lot of love, and then my parents pretty much ignored me. I think it's also because they were just tired after having the third kid. I was in and out of the hospital quite a bit as well at UCSF because of my heart condition.

You know, my childhood wasn't super happy, but it afforded me, enough struggle that I was able to survive and come out stronger, and definitely a little bit quirky. And I'm grateful for that. It's allowed me to then become the adult that I've become, and I'm super happy about that.

Do you have Asian cheerleaders in your high school?

Madeline:

My high school is primarily white and Hispanic. I totally get what you meant about the Asian cheerleaders.

[MUSIC]

Madeline:

Why is queer history meaningful to you, and what made you interested in studying it?

Amy:

Queer history to me is a site of empowerment. Not just because of the ways activists and artists changed society, but also in the ways that, queers endured so much, right? Back in the day, before I was a young baby dyke, I realized after many decades, if not centuries, of great struggle, these folks endured in order to create a better life for me. I think it's also, important for me to also be thinking about Asian-American history as well. I feel the same way about my Asian-American forbears before me, my ancestors who were here and endured not being able to vote, public lynchings and other kinds of atrocities against them, taking away their citizenship as well as their property and being incarcerated. And so all these previous struggles gives me strength to carry on, even on my worst day, because my worst day will never be as bad as the worst day of a queer Asian person from 50 years ago.

I initially became interested in history broadly, because I was actually failing out of college as an undergrad. I was a pre-med student not because my parents are Asian, but because I actually have a heart condition, and I wanted to give back to a medical community that
allowed me to live, but I failed General Chemistry. I got a D in organic. I was on academic probation. I had a 1.8 GPA for four semesters, but usually after four semesters, you get kicked out.

Then I decided to, take a history class. It was a women's history class, and it totally rocked my world. It sort of blew up my mind the way I could think about history through the lens of gender.

I learned that the Cold War was totally fueled by gender constructs, and a lot of the things that we live with today are products of gender from the Cold War that we invented because we had a war of technology with the Russians.

It piqued my interest in intellectual thought. I felt like college was a place where I belonged. I suddenly felt smart for the first time because I wasn't falling asleep reading my chemistry textbook. I used to put an M&M on every page, so every time I turned the page, I'd get to eat an M&M. This is studying the sciences, but that didn't work. I was still falling asleep, so it was the first time that I felt like capable of doing book learning.

I eventually graduated on Dean's List.

That's sort of why I fell in love with history, and I think it allowed me to think about the ways I also wanted to help other students who might be struggling in college. I believe that if they looked at history, they could gain a sense of belonging and a sense of meaning in how this nation was created.

[MUSIC]

**Madeline:**

Thank you for that story. You've taught like queer history courses or ethnic studies, gender theory courses. After discovering this interest, what made you want to actually teach it?

**Amy:**

When I went to grad school, I knew that I wanted to do a dissertation on Asian-American history. I knew I kind of wanted to do gender. I didn't really know that I wanted to do sexuality until started reading more books around women's sexuality in grad school.

I was simultaneously coming out. I remember I read George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, which had come out recently, and that's like considered a canon in queer history. I was just super mesmerized and impressed, and it made me fall in love with queer history.

I saw history as a tool of activism and engagement. I was actually a community organizer before I went to grad school. I was a tenant organizer and also a volunteer manager in New York, Chinatown.

And I decided to use history as a way to build community, and that's how I thought I could do it in the college classroom.
I didn't know what it meant to teach in a four-year institution, or that I could, so I thought, "Oh, you know, where could I make the most impact?" and I thought that it would be great to teach at a community college, and that's how I initially went to a Ph.D. program.

If you know anything about Ph.D. programs, they typically don't want folks who want to teach at the community college. They want grad students who will potentially become famous through their research, and then teach at a research university.

I became increasingly interested in historical research and then I was fortunate enough to land a job in a four-year baccalaureate institution.

Madeline:

Has anyone ever told you that the subjects that you've taught weren't important or necessary for students to know because it's so niche?

Amy:

For a number of my colleagues in late 1990s, they indeed could not get a job because they were doing queer of color history, and they were told that their work is too niche. Folks who, in different fields like literature and anthropology and political science, that were doing queer Asian-American studies were also told that their work is too niche. There's one person who interviewed at Cornell, and he was studying drag queens, drag culture in New York City, and the search committee asked him, why is he only studying himself and he's not a drag queen, but he is a Pinoy, and he was studying Pinoy queens, in New York City, so I do think that it's a common hurdle that many folks face.

Now it's a little different. Queer studies is seen as making an important intellectual contribution. I never faced that difficulty when I was on the job market. At San Francisco State, people were super open and believed that my research was important. You know, I also do San Francisco history for a university that's at least 30% Asian, right? And hella queer, too, right? The region is hella queer.

So, I didn't have to prove myself, you know, but I do know that in grad school I had a couple of white colleagues who would say, "Oh, aren't you that person working on a dissertation on yourself?"

My dissertation was on 1890 to 1920 San Francisco, which is not really me, it's, you know, several decades before I was born, if not half a century, so, you know, not totally accurate, but I do think that that idea definitely floats around among the more narrow minded.

Madeline:

Yeah, I could see that. "Oh, it's only because you're so marginalized. You always have to be studying yourself and finding out more about these struggles."

Amy:
The thing that people don't realize is that when you go to get a Ph.D., you do have to study something pretty narrow, so some people study the Civil War or specific battle in some other kind of war, or like a specific legislative act and its impact. So, we're all studying something niche in terms of our research. When people are looking at queer Asians and asking if you can do anything else besides study yourself, they're actually kind of racializing your intellect. Because, all of us, in fact, are studying something pretty narrow, but we're still broadly educated so that we can teach U.S. history very easily.

I could teach a U.S. survey course, no problem.

[MUSIC]

**Madeline:**

Touching back on what you mentioned about how, studying queer history and also doing social justice advocacy are connected. Could you just elaborate a little more on how you see the intersection of those two things?

**Amy:**

I would say even just 15 to 20 years ago, people really saw history as a tool of oppression because history is defined by the winners. You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. I'm referencing Audre Lorde here.

In the past ten years, people have really seen history as a powerful tool of changing the way we think about the past, empowering ourselves and moving towards a better future. You see this with artists who are taking up historical subjects to make sociopolitical statements. You also see this with activist groups that are taking up oral history projects, nonprofits that are taking up oral history projects to reclaim history. You see this on popular websites that say, "Hey, let's look at all these famous queers in the past."

You might think about Juneteenth, President Biden signed in as a federal day of recognition.

I have an essay called "Breathing Fire" that I published with the National Parks Foundation. It became probably my most widely read essay. All these groups, both corporations and nonprofits, have asked me to give a lecture, and people have talked about how inspiring that essay is.

I would never have imagined that it would've landed the way that it did, but this is also the work of public history, creating writing, presenting history for the larger public rather than just your profession.

So I do think that there's a way in which history has now entered the popular consciousness in a way that wasn't there previously. People increasingly are recognizing that by learning our history, we can actually change the way we are and the way we progress towards a more equitable society.

It's a reminder of how much history can actually change the way we see the world and think about groups who are marginalized in society.
Madeline:

You mentioned before, you were a founding co-curator for the GLBT History Museum, which is super cool. It was the first museum of its type in the U.S. ever, right? I'm hoping to go there someday. What was that like just to work on such a momentous project?

Amy:

As a grad student, I did research at the GBLT Historical Society, which is the hosting organization for the museum. At that time, the museum didn't exist yet. I went to a party at Susan Stryker's house, she's the founder of Trans Studies, after I moved up here to San Francisco and, there I met Don Romesberg, who is on the Board of Directors for the GBLT Historical Society.

He told me he was on the board, and I was like, "Oh, cool. That's my dream to be on the board of the Historical Society," and then Don made some gay crack about how that's kind of a pathetic dream, but he made that dream happen. He invited me to the board.

There was a lot of corporate types. I felt a little bit out of place. There were maybe like two or three historians but everybody else was in business. There wasn't anyone even in nonprofit organizations on the board.

I felt out of place, definitely. Many of the folks just seemed older, and there were a lot of gay dudes, and they just seemed well-established, so I was thinking about dropping out of the board. It just didn't seem like a good fit for me, and then Don Romesberg invited me to help him curate our first pop up gallery, which was in the Castro.

I curated it with Don Romesberg and Gerard Koskovich, two white guys, and they were super cool. They were both, I would say, like hardcore anti-racists, right? And they wanted to make sure that I was both included and not overburdened. They both supported me, and then at the same time, also did what they needed to do to make sure that the exhibit was representative. That was really super moving to me to have a white-dominated, queer space be so attentive and inclusive to queers of color and also women and trans folks.

I strongly believe in coalition building across different communities of queers. In San Francisco, folks are way more collaborative. Even the old school dykes are cool with gay guys. Gay guys also, for the most part, know that they need to be more feminist. That they're a part of the patriarchy and therefore need to give more opportunities to women, dykes, and just queer women generally.

That kind of community building and event organizing has been super moving to me.

[Music]
Going back to what you said about how Asian and queer identities are connected, how has that intersection of identities showed up in your life, whether that's in good ways or bad ways?

Amy:

I think it's difficult for many of us to come out, and when I say us, I'm saying queers broadly, but I think that for any immigrant family, our parents rely on us so deeply and intently. I'm also the only girl in the family.

I have two brothers, but you know, my mom does not rely on them to translate her voicemail, to help her with a computer, things like that.

When I came out to her, she wasn't supportive. Generally, my family was not supportive and it was quite difficult.

I understand that being queer and Asian can be very painful at times especially, you know, for coming out. I also know tons of queer Asians whose parents have no problem with it. I think especially for the younger generation the parents tend to be cooler because they're like my age, and they grew up with queer stuff all around them. I have a couple of peers who are around my age whose parents are Asian-American, meaning like born here, second and third generation, and some of them also, their parents outed them in high school. But definitely before the generations before me, I think it was extremely difficult for Asian-Americans to come out, and now it's probably just difficult rather than extremely difficult.

I do feel like I am in recovery of a perhaps a homophobic family. Now they're super cool. They're quite awesome and supportive because also the world around them has changed.

I love being queer and Asian. I remember when I, um, first moved to San Francisco, I was like just bowled over by the sheer number of queer Asians just walking around in the city. I would go to an API QWTC event, which is API Queer Women and Transgender Community and it's just an informal listserv, and then we gather for things like a banquet or picnic, but it was just incredible to see so many people who looked like me, who had jobs, you know, who were not unwell, not so beaten down by society, but they were quite happy and vibrant and joyful, and that motivated me to think, "Oh my goodness, I can have a normal life, I can get a job with health insurance and carve out happiness and fulfillment and do meaningful work in the community."

It's within this queer and Asian community that I find great comfort, you know?

Madeline:

It's like finally seeing yourself.

Amy:

You know, they can also be irritating sometimes because it's like hanging out with your family, but it's where my home is, where I feel inspired and daily go out into the world, refueled. A number of my friends still have difficulty with their families in terms of being accepted by them in their own during their fifties or late forties.
Just seeing their courage, live their truth each day in the midst of the reality that their families are not supported is also super moving and inspiring to me.

**Madeline:**

I really like what you said about how it felt to just finally find a community. I love meeting people of all identities, but I feel like meeting people who were raised with similar values as you and shared the similar experience of discovering you're queer. They're just going to understand you a lot better.

**Amy:**

For sure. I mean, the thing that I love about like the Queer Asian Dyke potluck is, like, everyone brings a dish. It's not like, you know, if there's gay guys at a potluck, they rarely cook. They usually just bring a bottle of wine, and then you're just stuck with all this booze, right?

Everybody's in the kitchen, washing dishes afterwards. It's just awesome! So you have a good meal and then you have a clean house afterwards. I mean, you can't really beat that, right?

And then at the same time, they can do things like, fix your kitchen sink. I'm actually not handy, but they can change your flat tire. I mean, I know these are all stereotypes, but it's just incredible how these queer women kind of move around the world in such an independent and forthright manner. I mean, just truly moving.

I hang out with the queer and Asian crew. They're all around me, but in history, they're very few of us. History is a super conservative field, and so what happens is that oftentimes if there's a queer AAPI history thing that folks need I get called quite a bit to be the person to do a talk or see some comments.

For folks who are invested in diversity, like at the GBLT Historical Society, they didn't only want the gay, white men talking to the press, so they would also have the press oftentimes call me, you know, to give quotations about things.

There's a way in which I think when there's so few of us that we get a little bit tokenized, and I have no problem being asked to do stuff. I can always say no, right? And I also believe that it's not a problem for them to ask me to do stuff because I'm the only one if they're also actively looking for other folks.

So I also make it a point to try to get as many queers of color into a board space that's largely white. But, you know, queers of color have other stuff to do. They don't always have time to be on a board of a nonprofit. Many of my own colleagues and friends, have pretty heavy family responsibilities, as do I. We just don't always have time for the the more, participation and other kinds of community engagement, and I'm happy to, you know, pitch in when I can for diversity and things like that.

[MUSIC]

**Madeline:**
You mentioned that history is conservative. You've published like a ton of research papers about this really fascinating topics involving queer Asians in history. How hard was it to find stories in historical documents?

Amy:

Back in the day, when I was working on my dissertation, there were very few sources that were digitized. There were like three or four San Francisco newspapers in the 19th century. I had to read every single day, page by page. I read through three or four sets of newspapers just to find queer stories, or things that could be queer.

Since I finished my Ph.D. and since I've published a few articles, there's been a ton of stuff digitized, so now you can type in gender impersonation or, uh, crimes of morality or sodomy, and all the newspapers articles will just pop up.

I feel a little bit like, "Ah! If I had gone to grad school ten years later, then my life would have been much easier."

The most difficult work for a historian is to recreate a story with all the needles that you find in the larger haystack to create a cohesive narrative, but the sources are easier to find now.

The Japanese-American immigrant press has all been digitized and is available on the Stanford University Hoover Institute website, so you could even type in, in Japanese, the word for basically sodomy, and then all the articles on sodomy in the Japanese language will pop up.

This is across the diaspora, so in Brazil, in Canada, in Mexico, in the U.S. as well as Hawaii. Just really incredible. I had great difficulty getting my first book published, which is Queer Compulsions. It's about Yone Noguchi. In the publishing world, they send it to two blind reviewers, and you have to have two positive reviews for the editorial board to then move forward.

We kept sending the manuscript out. I think may have sent it out to like 15 university presses and they kept getting rejected. I could never get two positive reviews.

They did give me helpful feedback, so it allowed me to rewrite the manuscript over and over again. The book is kind of a critique of this one Rice Queen named Charles Warren Stoddard. Sometimes the reviewer was a Rice Queen who is like, "Why can't the author be nicer to white people?" in a historical book. But I'm like, I'm not saying any commentary, you know? I'm just saying what happened and what, you know, the Japanese folks are saying.

Noguchi, the immigrant was fetishized by Stoddard, said all these comments about him, and I just quoted that in the book.

Those kinds of comments were very difficult for me to then, try to publish. Ultimately, I was able to overcome, all those issues, and it's really University of Hawaii Press. The acquisitions editor, Masako Ikeda, was so supportive and she had me recommend two reviewers, both gay men, and they were able to give me two positive reviews, so I was able to publish my first book.

And then after that, the world kind of changed. People started actually loving queers so much, loving queer studies. Even straight people started writing about queer studies, and then
obviously, they would get all the queer studies jobs because, you know, the world is like that also.

**Madeline:**

Did you ever experience discrimination or other barriers as a queer person of color in such an intense environment?

**Amy:**

Even in San Francisco, I would get called "fag" or even "chink," right, and I think those kinds of comments sort of land on me because I'm not sort of your stereotypical Asian female like in terms of the way I look.

Would they call a big, white bear a "fag" on the street? Probably not because they don't want to get pummeled. Would they call a beautiful Asian geisha a "chink" on the street? Probably not because they probably want to sleep with her.

It's this specific intersection that has brought me some grief, you know, on the streets, just walking around. I used to tell people that on the university campus, it's like I'm a respectable person, and then as soon as I step outside the classroom, I'm basically like garbage. But, you know, it's not a problem.

It's your typical ways of living in the world as a queer of color. Because I could find a space at work, right, where I'd be valued and also a space in the queer community where folks who value me that it would be okay.

We all face aggressions and microaggressions but I've still managed to get a proper job with health benefits and retirement and I'm super grateful.

At work, I've also faced a little bit of discrimination because of salary discrepancy. My workplace has generally been a very good place for me, but there's always haters, even in a very queer-friendly work environment. People tell me that I won't be able to advance in the world dressed the way I am. There's also been straight Asians, who considered themselves mentors to me, said that maybe I should hide parts of my identity. How do you hide being Asian? By telling me to grow my hair out and wear a dress? Those kinds of things have always come up. My mom also has been telling me since I came out, that I needed to not dress like a man if I wanted to be successful in the workplace.

Generally it's worked out.

San Francisco, San Francisco State University are both great places to be. It's not perfect. We still get harassed, but it's way better than me being in Texas or Florida or even. New York City to be very frank. I felt extremely tired in New York City in a way that I don't feel tired here in San Francisco.

*MUSIC*
Madeline:

Earlier you mentioned after having a hard time in college, you became interested in helping uplift struggling students. Could you talk a little bit more about that and why?

Amy:

I want to be someone that opens doors for students. Sometimes when we're 18, we don't really know what we want to do. We think we do. We think we want to be a doctor or a teacher or something that's very common in our lives as teenagers. Very rarely is an 18 year old gonna be like, I want to be a historian. You don't meet any historians. At least I never did.

I didn't know what kind of options I had for career happiness. I thought that I had to go down a specific path, and I almost dropped out of college because of that rigid way of thinking, and I just want young people or people in college to know that it's a time of exploration, right? You don't have to go down a rigid path. That's precisely why you're in college and not a professional school, right? You're in college to kind of explore, figure out not only what you're good at, but what you like doing, what you would want to spend 8 hours a day doing. And I'm not saying that everyone should become a historian, but I am saying that everyone should have the opportunity to explore different ways of thinking and being in the world.

I grew up reading about Asian-American history. My mom was a little mini activist herself. She was a teacher. She assigned all these books about the Japanese incarceration camp to me, assigned reading, like for Christmas, instead of getting a toy, I would get, a book by Yoshiko Uchida, which is like a teen novel, on being incarcerated. It's kind of a strange thing to give to a teenager, but I knew about history. I knew about my own history. I also knew about Japanese imperialism because my mom, I'm actually a mixed Asian. My dad is Okinawan, and so my mom was very, very specific about letting me know the history of Japanese imperialism in Asia, right? So there's all these ways in which she was already training me to be critical of empire, nation, colonialism and be cognizant of the value of community and self-determination which was fantastic. But even then, I still didn't figure out that I could really explore what I wanted to do with my life.

Teaching history is a way that I want to open doors for people, whether they're struggling in college or they're bored in college.

I just want them to be excited about life. Learning about history has gotten me excited about life, and I want to share that excitement with as many people as possible.

Madeline:

It's interesting what you said about learning about the history of Japanese imperialism, along with the history of their incarceration because I've always been interested in how connected we should feel to our ancestors.

Like, I'm a Chinese and Burmese descent, both groups of which have been oppressed, especially immigrants to the United States, but also both groups have done some pretty screwed up things.
Do you just wanna talk about that feeling of understanding what your ancestors did, but also being proud of your heritage?

Amy:

That's absolutely what you have to do. We should be proud of our heritage but also understand the reality that power can often corrupt and that we need to be vigilant. I often joke to people that folks in Japan are really prone to being vulnerable to fascism because they're all about conformity.

I think that that might allow a society to run smoothly on one hand, but it also allows inequality to continue and be perpetuated, and it allows for little change.

I am in a Japanese-American community that is all about social justice, is all about change. And I'm proud to be a part of a Japanese-American community that was historically incarcerated. What that means is that the commitment here is way more, attuned to injustice.

And It's a community consensus that we need to fight it. Recently, the Nichi Bei, which is a Japanese-American immigrant press, maybe a couple of years ago, they asked me to start a column for their newspaper. They wanted it to be a column on queer issues in higher ed. I was like, "Whoa. What is happening? Like, I remember the columnists in the Japanese immigrant press before were all these, like, all dudes, right? Who were talking about something that they thought was, you know, really funny or interesting, but I had no interest in them.

I had never envisioned that I would be asked to participate in this conversation, so it's both that the community is committed to social justice, and also, I have a responsibility to my community to participate in that discussion and conversation. It means being both critical of one's own community, but also being proud of the things that we're doing well. Yeah, but you absolutely called it the way it should be: to hold both and to kind of be working towards more inclusion.

[MUSIC]

Madeline:

How does it feel as, and sorry if this is rude, an older person to be seeing this new generation where being queer and Asian is more possible, and more queer kids are coming out earlier, and people are becoming activists, and just big changes?

Amy:

I have no problem with you calling me an old person. I'm proud that I survived this long. I'm happy about it. I'm also super grateful that younger folks are interested in chatting with older folks.

In the APIQWTC community, I'm considered a "melder," which is a middle elder, so there's folks who are a little bit older than me in their seventies, and eighties. I'm in my fifties, and there's people in their thirties.
The 30 somethings are always asking me to reach out to the seventy year olds and ask them for like an intergenerational conversation or a meet up. They also want to know, "What do the seventy-year olds want that we could offer them," right? So I'm super happy to facilitate that conversation. I know for a fact that this younger generation of queers, API queers, is totally inspiring, and they live in a world that many folks in my generation and above could never have imagined. We didn't grow up thinking that we could legally marry somebody. We didn't grow up thinking that there would be legal rights protecting us from discrimination. We also didn't think that our families would ever accept us, and that young people under the age of 18 would be able to be out in the way that they are now.

It's super moving. I think that in the mainstream queer community, there is a stereotype that Asians are repressed. There are no Asian queers. But I mean, look around you. They're all they're all over, right? I mean, especially if you're in the Bay Area, and that is incredible to me. And and families supporting these young folks is super moving, too.

When I was in college as an undergrad, I was straight, and then when I went to grad school, I came out as queer, but then I had to tell all my undergrad friends that I was queer, and I lost pretty much all of them.

Many of them, said, "Amy, now we have nothing in common." Like what? Only our heterosexuality was a thing that we had in common. Like, that's pretty pathetic.

They didn't talk to me for like 15 years. Many of them are reaching out to me because their kids are coming out as nonbinary and having mental health issues, and the parents are having challenges.

It's a sign of progress also that all these friends who dumped me are now like, "Hey, Amy, let's be friends because my kids are queer."

I didn't expect that to happen but there's just so many folks who are identifying as non-binary as well. It seems like everybody is queer to me.

Madeline:

It's really cool to be part of this generation. It's interesting that you would read books about queer theory or queer history that kind of inspired you to go down this path, like Gay New York, and now your work could be the new thing that inspires younger people.

[MUSIC]

Madeline:

What advice would you give to either, like an aspiring historian or an aspiring teacher?

Amy:

Be patient with us, be patient with folks who might seem slower changing their mind. The world does change and can change, and it's really students who drive that change, both high school students and college students.
Sometimes, young folks may not understand the power that they have. But just even thinking about the California DMV, allowing M, F, and X now as a gender choice on the driver's license. When that happened, all the Gen Xers were like, "Oh my God, that was the Millennials who did that." Like, we never imagined that gender could be expanded on a legal document. That's the kind of dreaming that millennials did and enacted, and that's what young people always bring to any community.

Just keep pushing and be patient.

[MUSIC]

Madeline:
Do you have any book recommendations?

Amy:
Oh, I do, uh. Uh, there's a book by, uh, Melinda Lo, uh, and I think the title is…

Madeline:
…Last Night at the Telegraph Club

Amy:
Oh, my God. I love it.

Madeline:
Oh my God, that's like one of my favorite books. It was like something I read when I was on my little like queer discovery journey, and it just really helped me come to terms with my identity.

That coming out scene made me, like, start sobbing.

Amy:
As I was reading it, tears are streaming down my face. I'm a huge fan, and Malinda, she asked me, who she should interview, so Crystal Jiang is one of the folks that she interviewed, and Crystal Jiang grew up in Chinatown, and Crystal literally said that, you know, the way the kids were walking to school, with their siblings and then splitting off at the street based on whether they went to junior high or middle school, she said it's exactly what they did. She's just brilliant. She just really captures the moment, and just does it in such a moving way.

And it's like, "What?" Like, "We're in a book?" like, you know, "in a novel?"
I don't have to just read about Holden Caulfield and Catcher in the Rye. Like, I can actually read Malinda Lo's book and then feel like, "Wow, you know, I'm here." Like, "This is a world for me too."

Madeline:

It's so cool that someone even a lot older than me has read and loved the same book and still seen parts of themselves represented in those characters. Art and writing and books can transcend your age and where you live and who you are. It's something that can just bring a lot of people together no matter how different you are.

Also, I just really like that book.

Amy:

It's been so moving to meet you, Madeline. I'm grateful to all of the young people for showing us queers that we can have a different youth that's not heteronormative, that doesn't tell us that we all have to be or act a certain way.

Madeline, you're going to continue to do great things in the future.

Youspeak Outro:

This is Youspeak Radio. We are Caleigh Campbell, Diego Gonzalez, Madeline Lee, Grae Mordhorst, Elliot Starr-Schneider, Marbella Zoliz-Maldonado with generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, a project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.