

**Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

**AMY LAM**

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

August 5, 2013  
Berkeley, California

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with generous support from the Royce Fellowship

### Narrator

Amy Grace Lam (b. 1977) is a word artist, mother, keeper of space, community advocate and lover of nature. She was born in Canada to parents from Hong Kong and grew up in New York, wanting to be a *chinariqueña*. This multicultural upbringing helped Amy become the brightly colored chameleon of sorts she is today.

Amy is a passionate Asian American advocate, holding a Ph.D. in cultural psychology. She works to empower and give voice to underserved and disenfranchised communities including people of color, women, recent immigrants and refugees. She has done this work with the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center, Street Level Health Project, Kaiser Permanente, UC Berkeley, and now Community Health for Asian Americans. In 2011, Amy was recognized as one of the top 15 Asian American women progressive leaders across the country for her work in empowering Asian American girls and women for sexual and reproductive health by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, *Hyphen* magazine, and *Angry Asian Man*.

Amy's writing has crossed various genres including scientific articles, children's stories, poetry, an occasional opinion piece, and mixed-media pieces intersecting words with objects. Her work has appeared in *AsianWeek*, *Feministing.com*, *AIDS Education and Prevention*, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, and *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. Her mixed-media art work was exhibited with Asian American Women Artists Association's *Hungry Ghost: Yearning for Fulfillment* exhibit.

Amy's life work is healing, personally and collectively. As an Asian American woman, she has experienced historical and personal childhood sexual trauma. She is a founding collaborator of UC Berkeley's Healing Arts Collective and the API Women's Summit, a project to bring API immigrant and American-born women together through storytelling. Through her writing, Amy hopes to empower others to find home within themselves. Amy is fluent in Spanish and is improving her Cantonese and Mandarin by leaps and bounds every day. Amy lives by the Pacific Ocean with her two beautiful daughters. You can visit her website at [www.amygracelam.com](http://www.amygracelam.com).

### Interviewer

Juhee Kwon (b. 1991) is an undergraduate at Brown University, studying Biology and Ethnic Studies.

### Restrictions

Amy Lam will retain copyright for her lifetime.

### Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. One file: 1 hr 10 min 29 sec.

# Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Amy Lam.

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Transcript of interview conducted August 6, 2013, with:

AMY LAM  
Berkeley, California

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is August 6, 2013. I'm here with Amy Lam at her office at UC [University of California,] Berkeley in California, and this is part of the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History project. Thank you so much for being here. I know I don't want to be too formal, but can we start from the very beginning? And maybe if you want to tell us a little bit about how you grew up, where you grew up, and how you developed your political consciousness.

LAM: Sure. My name is Amy Lam, and it's funny that you say that I'm here at UC Berkeley. It's a funny place for me to be. It's an interesting space that I find myself in this past year. So yeah, that was interesting to hear that.

I grew up in the East Coast, in New York. I was actually born in Canada. My parents had immigrated to the U.S. from Hong Kong in the late sixties, early seventies, and they actually came to Sacramento. My father has a really hilarious story. He was sitting in Hong Kong, looking over a newspaper with friend—who was actually my mom's sister—and they were reading the ads in the back, different colleges, and it says that it could go to Healed College. Healed College is basically like—it's kind of like a community college, where you can get your Associate's degree, but it's private; you have to pay for it. And you see commercials now on the TV that you can get your degree from Healed College. And I was like, "Oh my gosh!" So my father saw that and wanted to go to school, and so that's how he decided to come to the U.S.

KWON: Oh.

LAM: Yes. So my father actually only finished school up till sixth grade.

KWON: In Hong Kong?

LAM: In Hong Kong. [He] had gone to sailing school, which was basically an orphanage school for kids, and was taking night classes in Chemistry and Photography. So he had never really had a formal secondary education in

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Hong Kong. This is probably bad to put on the tape, but he used his brother's high school diploma and his report card—

KWON: Yeah, I was going to ask how he got into the college (laughs).

2:19

LAM: And made it that it was his, and that's how he came here. But then once he came here, he obviously needed to do a lot of learning, so he went to a Christian high school called Christian Brothers [High] School—and they actually have a winery, too, in Napa. I just saw it last year—and begged the principal to take him in. And upon begging enough, the principal took him in, so my father finished his last year of high school, and then went to Sac[ramento] City [College], then Sacramento State [California State University, Sacramento], and decided he wanted to get his PhD in Chemistry.

KWON: Wow.

LAM: And so [he] moved from Sacramento to Buffalo [New York]. Me, him, and my mom, we actually lived in Fort Erie, which is the border town where Niagara Falls is. My father would drive to Buffalo to school. So this is the beginning—or one of the beginnings of my story, and it's very interesting because in many ways, my life has paralleled his. So then after that, my father ended up doing his postdoc in New York City so—

KWON: He did his postdoc, too?

LAM: (nods) So we moved to New York City. My father was at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and we lived across the street from there. And that was how I ended up growing up in New York.

So the funny thing about my story and how it parallels my dad['s] is that I always idealized my father as this person who—his parents were beggars, and actually all of my parents are adopted. So beyond my grandparents, I don't even know what my lineage is, which is a big deal, in a lot of Asian cultures, to not know where you're from. But just because of war and poverty, you know, my parents had to live with different people growing up. I mean, my grandparents. Knowing that my father came from this very impoverished background and had so much drive to make it and kind of lied his way through but ended up having a PhD in chemistry was always something I prided myself in. So it's funny that this whole narrative I'm telling you is around this academic thing—even just starting with the whole UC Berkeley thing. Because when I was four, I remember asking my dad, "Daddy, Daddy, How do I become a doctor?" and he goes, "You have to invent something new and then write a book about it." Your dissertation. And I'm like, What am I going to do? I don't know if I can invent something new, and I was dead serious. If I was

going to become a PhD and this is what I had to do, I didn't know if I could do it. It was a very very vivid memory for me.

Other ways that our backgrounds kind of paralleled is—so I grew up in New York, I lived in the Bronx till I was almost eight, then I moved the suburbs of Westchester, which was a very jarring experience for me. And I actually think a lot of my identity was formed early on—I would say seven and under—of just the set way that I saw the world. Up until I was seven, I—by that time, spoke Chinese, English, and understood Spanish, because I had a babysitter who was from Argentina, and she didn't speak English. So that was how I learned Spanish when I was four or five. I also had a Bengali babysitter. I grew up with a lot of Puerto Ricans and Caribbean and Black folks and Italians and Irish, so I had such a multicultural upbringing. My church, my church was in Flushing, and so our church, I felt [that] it was like heaven, because there was an English service, Chinese service, Spanish service. There was a Russian service; there was [a] Portuguese [service]. There were so many different groups worshipping God, and I was like—I really thought the world was like this, you know? And then I moved to Westchester.

KWON: And what's the racial population?

7:01

LAM: It was like 95 percent White.

KWON: Middle class?

LAM: Yeah, upper middle class, and it was terrible. I remember just seeing the people of color. I could count [them] on one hand, and [I] just wanted to cling to them, because I wasn't used to being with so many White people and not even like—it was like that ethnic cultural background wasn't there. So even when I was living in the city, you had the Italians, you had the Irish people, you had the Greeks, you had Jewish folks, so people who really held onto their culture of origin. But in Westchester it was just very WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant]-y.

One of the first racial incidents I remember was actually when I was seven. I had run up to befriend this Black boy in my classroom, and I was like, Oh my god. Thank God. There's a Black kid. I feel safe now. And he looks at me, and he goes, "Get away from me, flat face!" And I remember being so shocked and so sad. And I remember so not understanding what just happened, you know? And coming from this place when there was a lot of multiculturalism and a bond that I had with Black folks in the Bronx, and all of a sudden, here—here's another minority, saying to me like these racial slurs to another minority. And I was like, "This is the weirdest thing I've ever experienced. Huh? How can you be saying this to me?" But it was really devastating. I think I was very race-conscious from early on.

I think another big thing that I also knew early on was about language and the challenges you have when you don't speak English. I first started speaking English when I was three, and I know that because I remember when I first went to preschool, I had no idea what people were saying. And I just went there, first day of class, staring at everyone. And I was like, Oh my gosh. But you know, you learn quickly. But I think because of that experience, I was always very sensitive and cognizant when there would be people coming from different countries, who couldn't speak English. In my school in the Bronx, like I said, there were a lot of other minorities, but there weren't that many Chinese folks. One time this girl came from China, and she spoke Mandarin. My family spoke Cantonese, and she comes, and you can tell that she's new and she doesn't know English, and I was like looking at her, and I was praying to God that He would give me the language to speak to her, because she was crying and I wanted to talk to her. But I couldn't. And I was like, "Why don't I know Mandarin?" So I think that given that those are the kind of experiences I remember of myself when I was little that it's not a surprise that I am where I am today, because they were personal to me and also I saw them in the people that were living around me.

The last two things I'll say about my background is—so my family ended up moving to Canada, when I was fifteen. My father had a job in Montreal, and so we moved there. I remember also praying to God when I was in ninth grade, I don't want to live in this house anymore. I want to move away. I want to graduate as soon as I can. And when we got to Montreal, I was supposed to go to grade 10, but the school that I went to—Grade 10 was too easy, I had already done that stuff. So they jumped me to Grade 11, and in Montreal, Grade 11 is the last year of high school.

KWON: Oh wow.

11:29

LAM: So in Montreal, you end Grade 11 and then you do something called CEGEP, which is junior college for two years, and then you go to university for three years. So I literally had two years of high school, finished when I was fifteen, and got to leave. Why I'm saying this story is because it's very similar to my father's that he had very little high school education, jumped around, did all these crazy stuff, and still ended up with his PhD. So I ended high school at 15. I did so bad on my SATs, like all this craziness, but here I am now with a PhD. So yeah, that was the other funny story that I wanted to share in terms of parallel to my father's life.

KWON: I know you did your undergrad, and did your Master's, PhD, and then did you also do your postdoc? Can you talk a little bit about that and how much your racial consciousness from before influenced the work that you did?

12:13

LAM: Yeah. So I actually ended up going to a Christian college for undergrad. I think people would say, “Wow, weird,” to see like where I am now from that. Like I said, I grew up going to church every week, and I wouldn’t say religion was important to me, but God was important to me and divinity. Even since I was a little kid, I’ve always been fascinated with divinity. When I was growing up, we used to have these encyclopedias called Childcraft—I don’t think they have them anymore—but it would document different kinds of experiences like there was the natural world, you could learn about geography, and I would always read the religion one. I was so fascinated by different gods and different ways that people worshipped, so I think that that was always really important to me.

After I went to high school, I went to this bible college for a year, and they had a scholarship that if I went to this Christian college, I would only have to pay 2,500 dollars in tuition.

KWON: For all four years?

LAM: Every year.

KWON: Oh okay.

LAM: So it would be ten thousand dollars by the time I was done. So of course, I went, and considering that I had done bad on my SATs, there was not that many options. That’s what happens when you graduate high school early (laughs).

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So I went to this Christian college, called Liberty University, which was founded by Jerry Falwell—again, when people know, they’re like, “Oh my God. I cannot believe you went to this school.” But this was the school that I went to, and I was very conservative at the time, like I would say I was pro-life and anti-gay rights, and very—having a lot of traditional values, just growing up from the family that I grew up in. It has been a really interesting journey to unpack all the things that your parents gave you and figure out what you want to do with them, which is basically what my journey was from the time that I started college till postdoc. You know, I think it’s solid now, but the whole exploration of figuring out what’s yours and what’s your parents’, and what you want to share and what you don’t, and how you deal with that is very interesting.

So even though I had a lot of those conservative values, I’ve cared deeply for social justice, like from the beginning. When I was in eighth grade, I remember like some of the first Earth Day celebrations, and I was a part of that. I joined PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals], I was a vegetarian, I was doing—I marched across Bear Mountain Bridge. I was doing a lot of environmental action stuff. When I was in ninth grade, I wrote an article about the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] club at my school, and again, wanting to hear the voices of students of color. And when I was

15:01



twelve, I was fascinated with HIV/AIDS. I have no idea why, but in my health class, that was the topic that I chose. And so this thing of HIV/AIDS literally has been such a part of my life. The first time I heard about AIDS was when I was eight years old and I had come out to California—I think it was like 1986, something like that—come to California when AIDS first started being a crisis, and on this elevator door, it was written, Have you gotten AIDS yet?

KWON: What?

LAM: And I look at my dad, and I'm like, (whispers) "What's AIDS?" And he's like—I don't really even think he said anything to me. But I knew it was something bad or loathed, because everybody was silent in the elevator. So that was my first consciousness of hearing that word, and then when I was twelve, I studied it, and then when I was in college, that was what I wanted to do my volunteer work [around], to work with folks that were HIV positive. And I remember ending up—I think I just started to work on it towards the end, but my advisor cautioning me to be really careful because of not wanting to promote the gay lifestyle in doing this work, just because I was representing a Christian university, being really careful about that, and I was like, "What?" And that was one of the first times this tug started happening with me about what my religion said, and what I was inclined to do. I was like, "I don't care. These are people. I don't understand why I have to be careful." So I clearly remember that feeling.

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And then what really changed the tide for me was actually in my junior year of college, I got pregnant, which is obviously really bad if you're a Christian, and if you're going to a Christian college. Like—

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KWON: What kind of support system was there?

LAM: Umm I don't know. So it was—probably the second most traumatic thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life. It was pretty bad. We had to tell the heads of the school, like all this crazy stuff. We ended up getting married, but my parents convinced us to return to school, and so we got married, we returned to school. But that whole experience really started shattering my belief system around Christianity, because I remember, like I said, growing up really pro-life. I didn't know what I was going to do, and even before I knew I was pregnant, I was like, Hmm would I have an abortion? Just like really thinking about it. But after I had the pregnancy test, and I knew, I could just—I felt connected to this person that was growing inside of me, and I even knew her name. Not even on a physical level, on a very metaphysical level, like I just felt connected to this being. And I was like—I knew that I was going to have this baby.

But I remember my parents asking me if I wanted to get rid of it. And not even using the word abortion, because that is a very loaded term. They're just like, "Do you want to take care of it?" And you know when

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you're in that age—because I was eighteen then—of moving from black and white to lots of gray, but still you—you know, when you're a child, you have very black and white mentality, and as you're an adolescent you start seeing that things aren't so black and white. I was like, "What are you saying? My entire life you taught me to be pro-life, and then now that this happened, now all of a sudden, you believe abortion's okay?" And I was like, "How can values change this fast?" And it really fucked with me, because I was like, "I don't understand all this—the difference between rhetoric and your personal belief system."

But it was a really humbling experience for me to be pregnant as a young teen, not having a lot of support. I mean, I was living in Virginia; my parents were living in New York. As an Asian American [felt] a lot of shame from Asian culture, like all of my parents' family saying, asking me why I didn't get an abortion. So it was a really horrendous time, but that's when I would say my faith in Christianity started shattering. And then I started figuring out like, What are the values that we have in life and what's really important? And questions around gay rights, gay marriage, abortion, all those kind of loaded issues. I just started questioning all of it, and I was like, "I don't even understand where these rules come from."

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After I finished college, I decided that I wanted to go to grad school. Mostly I wanted to go to grad school, because I wanted to prove that I hadn't ruined my life, right? When I was four, I wanted to be a doctor, but that was almost because my dad's a doctor. And then when I was nineteen, when I graduated college, I was like, "I'm going to become a doctor now, because I don't want anyone to say that I messed up." So that was a very big motivator. And so my entire family moved out to California, and in—yeah, that was 1997, so we've been out in California since then. I knew I wanted to study Asian American psychology, and that's why I came out to the West Coast, because there wasn't a lot of that in the East Coast at the time. I went to school in Santa Barbara and really started delving into my Asian American identity then. Still, in terms of other issues, I wasn't—I was still developing. Coming from the South and from this really Christian background, there was a lot of things about feminism that I didn't like or agree with, and so I was still struggling with those things. I got my Masters in counseling, but I feel like by the end of the time I finished my Master's, a lot more of my racial consciousness was developed.

21:12

When I moved to Davis, where I got my PhD, that's when I started doing sex research. I was really interested in looking at teen sexuality, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, all within the Asian context, and that's when I think my views around sexuality and women's rights blew up even more. And then when I did my postdoc, I really focused on reproductive health and then learned *then*, around my postdoc time, around reproductive justice movement and those kind of things, so it was really gradual. I think because I didn't have a full high school education, and I'm a teenager going to college—in a Christian college, where you don't have

a lot of these critical studies. So a lot of it early on was just based on personal experiences, and it was actually the process of going to grad school that I got conscientized to learn about these other issues over time.

KWON: You were talking about feminism and how you weren't really okay with that idea from having lived in Virginia for a while. When did you actually make peace or analyze it critically?

23:51

LAM: That's really funny that you say that, because I've had—I've always had struggles with women, actually. And I'm laughing, because when I was working at NAPAWF [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum], I remember saying to one of my friends who also worked there, like, "This is weird, I cannot believe I'm working for a women's organization. Because I hate women." Something like that, you know?

KWON: (laughs) Yeah.

LAM: Because when I was younger, most of my friends were boys, and going to grad school was the first time that I had close women friends, and it was so weird for me. Like I'm making a face right now, because it—I was like, "I can't believe I'm going into psychology. There's so many women!"

24:32

KWON: Right, right.

LAM: So it's been all of these years, even till—yeah, till NAPAWF, to actually accept the fact that I'm a woman. And honestly I think the reason, my resistance, comes from being a woman because of a sexual trauma I experienced when I was little. I was sexually abused by my grandfather when I was four, and I've never wanted to be a girl because of that. I remember praying to God, when I was ten, that I wouldn't get breasts. Like praying, Please. I would always dress like a tomboy. I was always very masculine. And I don't think it was as much as being a butch as like protecting myself. If I look like a boy, then men wouldn't look at me, and I would be safe. So this thing around gender identity and sexuality, for me, I think it's always been almost like an act of resistance, you know? So accepting the fact that I was a woman was really really challenging for me. And I remember times when I would never—like all I wore was black. I would never wear pink and things like that. And now I have a pink purse.

KWON: I know.

LAM: And somebody even looked at me, and they were like, Oh my God, you have a pink purse? Or like, I'll dye my hair pink. And that—you can tell, now, I'm comfortable with myself. But how long it took to not equate being a woman with being weak, or being abused, or being silenced and

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victimized. And for me, being a woman was equated to all of those words, and so becoming a feminist and really holding my power as a woman, has been actually a very personal journey that has become political, just on the side. But it's actually always first been a personal journey about learning how I can be a woman and be strong, and I don't have to be strong like a man.

KWON: Was NAPAWF the first woman's organization that you worked with?

27:14

LAM: Yes.

KWON: What kind of organizations did you work with before that?

LAM: I was just in university. So I was doing my postdoc, and I was doing HIV/AIDS stuff. So you're just doing it by yourself. In the academic world, everything is siloed, and you're just working with professors. It's weird. Now, like of course, I might've wanted to do things differently, but I really think that what academic life offered me was being able to see behind a veil. Like not being able to jump in to all of these movements, at the time, but being really curious. Almost being like a bystander and watching everything, because when you're an academic, you're a researcher and you look at things from a theoretical lens or an empirical lens, and you're supposed to be neutral. Or that's at least what psychologists say. I know a lot of social science disciplines aren't like that, but psychology has this false sense that they're a science (laughs). And very quantitative, and you're supposed to be neutral. So it was safe there, that I could study about sexuality and women's issues and race, but not *me*. And when you start becoming part of a social justice movement, it *is* about you; it's not academic anymore. And so it was a very big shift to be part of NAPAWF, and to identify myself as a woman, a feminist, all those things.

And I remember how scared I was that my parents were going to find out who I was working with and for. Because of such a pro-choice stance, you know, and the other organization that we were working with for the California Women's Collaborative was called Choice USA. I was like, Oh my God. When my parent's friends in Flushing find out, I'm going to be dead. And that was all I could think about the whole time. It wasn't really me, but of my entire parents' friends, or like what if they read an article that I was in, and they saw I said this? Like oh my gosh. So again, like I said, being part of these movements, it's very personal.

KWON: How did you get introduced to NAPAWF?

29:29

LAM: So I got introduced from Yin [Ling Leung], and before Yin, it was from Tracy Weitz, who is the director of ANSIRH [Advancing New Standards In Reproductive Health], the place that Sujatha [Jesudason] is at now.

KWON: Oh wow. Okay.

LAM: So Tracy also works at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco], and during my last year of my postdoc in 2005, I was looking to figure out what I was going to do afterwards, and I was doing all these informational interviews to find out all the kinds of different sexual health stuff that people were doing. It was around April and you know, you're graduating in June, and I still hadn't found something, and I was like, "Oh my gosh," getting antsy, and then all of a sudden, this woman sends me an email and starts telling me about this NAPAWF Choice USA project, and saying that she thinks that I'd be really interested.

KWON: How did she hear about you?

30:18

LAM: I must've sent her an email as one of those random emails that I was sending everyone, where you tell them what you're interested in, send them your resume, and see if they'll talk to you. So she talked to me, and she told me about the project, and I was like, "Oh my God. This is me. Like this is *me*," and so she's like, Yeah, you have to meet this woman named Yin. So Yin and I met in Chinatown in San Francisco at R&G Lounge, I think, and we hit it off. It was like, "Oh my gosh." For the first time, I felt like my research was meaningful, and I could contribute to the API [Asian & Pacific Islander]'s movement in this really big way. I felt so connected, because it wasn't the kind of white woman feminism that didn't gel with me; it just didn't, like the really individualistic, all about abortion thing. That wasn't me, and talking to Yin, I felt so validated and at home, you know, in hearing how women of color—we come to the reproductive justice movement for many reasons. It's not just about our own personal bodies but the health of our sisters, our grandmothers, the health of our community. Reproductive justice means all of these things. And so I felt embraced, and I was like, "This is the kind of woman's movement I want to be a part of, and that it doesn't have to just be all the protesters, you know, that you could do social justice work through research." So it just felt very—that I could belong. I didn't have to change myself to be all these things, but whoever I was, that this movement would take me. And so that's how I got introduced to NAPAWF.

KWON: So were you in charge of the California Young Women's Collaborative? And that was your first job?

32:09

LAM: Yes.

KWON: That was—when? When was it?

LAM: 2005 or 2006. We [Yin and I] met in 2005, and so it started in the fall of 2005, but really picked up in January of 2006. And at the time—and I've always just been a consultant on the project, not an employee, but still the research head of the project. So it was me, who was doing the research, Yin, who was the organizing person [Organizing Director] from the NAPAWF side, and then Choice USA, who also had an organizing lead, and then they had another person, who was helping us do more of the admin work. As time went on, NAPAWF ended up taking over the project, because there were disagreements in how the project was run between Choice USA and NAPAWF. And so then, I think, by 2007 just became a NAPAWF project. 2007 or 8.

KWON: And were you still involved with it?

33:18

LAM: I was still involved till 2009. Along with others, I helped run the UC [University of California] Davis cohort, UC Berkeley cohort, and a San Francisco State cohort. And then by that time, I had done enough, helping build it up from the ground. It was moving towards a different stage where it was becoming more formal, and they wanted a curriculum and all this stuff, and that's kind of not my thing. I like the building part, not the structure part, and so it was moving to Southern California in 2009, and so that's when I stepped off the project.

KWON: Where did you go?

34:02

LAM: After that, I—at that time, 2009, I was crazy. I was doing the NAPAWF project, I was the consultant for API Wellness, which is the first AIDS service organization in the nation for APIs, and I was working at Kaiser [Permanente].

KWON: Oh you were working at Kaiser. Yeah.

LAM: Yeah, so I was getting divorced. That was the beginning of my divorce in 2009. I realized that I needed more stability in my life, so I had to drop these consultant projects and just work one job and get health insurance. And so I worked at Kaiser for a year and a half, and it was a really difficult time for me personally, but also just because the work wasn't me. I was a Community Research Liaison for a Genes and Environment Project, which you can tell, it's not my area at all. It's like nothing that I studied, but the part that I was connected to was the community building. That's why I took the job. And so after being there a year and a half, I transitioned back to the community and went to Street Level [Health Project], where I became the Program Director. I had been volunteering with Street Level, and I was on the board—and yeah, volunteering since 2005, so it was a really natural transition, but it was the first time they ever had a program director. So it was new in that way. And so it was there, not

doing reproductive justice but doing immigrants' rights work, which was different, but it was like I needed a break. After doing work that was so close to home, I was like, I needed to step out and look at things a little differently. So it was nice to be doing immigrant health, immigrant rights work, and work mostly with the Latino community.

KWON: And then what happened?

35:55

LAM: And then I decided that I didn't want to write grants anymore.

KWON: How long did you stay on for Street Level?

LAM: I stayed in Street Level till 2012. I had been writing grants for Street Level, since 2007 as a sole grant writer, so I was like, "I don't want to do this anymore."

KWON: That's so long.

LAM: Yeah. Yes, and grant writing is hard, especially when you're the only person. And I'm a writer, and so I felt like—I didn't want to pimp my writing anymore to write it to sell things or buy things, whatever. So I wanted to test myself and see if I could actually have a job where I didn't write, which—it sounds funny but I didn't know what I would do, because I wrote grants for five years as a job. And then before that I was doing research, which is a lot of writing, too. So what do you do if all you've known for like ten years is how to write to get paid? It's scary. And so I took this job [at UC Berkeley], and now [it] comes back to the beginning of the story, that I'm at UC Berkeley now. Because there's almost no writing required—it's just emails.

KWON: What do you mean? What do you do?

37:16

LAM: So I'm a Field Supervisor, and a field supervisor means that I work with MPH [Masters in Public Health] students who are going out on their internships here at the School of Public Health. I just advise them, help them through their internship process, but also I support other projects and other community things and basically be the bridge between the students and the community work. I was excited to take the job in the sense that I felt that I could do a really good job of bridging students with community work. Because again, academics, they don't always know what's happening on the ground. I was like, "I know what's happening on the ground," and I have a PhD so I felt like they could accept me, you know, like I wasn't just somebody from the ground, that I had both the academic knowledge and the grounded knowledge in the community. So that's why I took the position.

What's been great about being here is working with the students in some of the specific projects—two projects that I'm most proud of is the healing arts collaborative, and the API women's circle. So the Healing Arts Collaborative—is it Collaborative or Collective? I don't know. It might be Collective. [correction: Health Arts Collective] I've been working with one student, Ivy McClelland, and really looking at community trauma and how do we heal community trauma? And looking at the role of arts and performance and dance, all those kinds of expressive arts, and seeing their role in healing community trauma.

38:27

KWON: And what kind of community is this? Is it a specific ethnic community?

39:11

LAM: So no. We say community trauma in general, but it's actually whatever folks have gathered. Last Spring, the folks who gathered were a group of students, so collectively, we came from different backgrounds—queer, Latino, Asian, women, trans folks—so it's almost like we represented our community in a sense. [It was about] having this experiment of how we could heal our own trauma and connect with each other in this group. We had several weeks where different people would come in and demonstrate to us how to use art in a healing way. But it was different than just doing art therapy, because when you do art therapy or music therapy, it's very individual. It's still a therapist with a client, doing something personal like a journal or a collage. But *this*, there was all this collective stuff, so you had to interact with each other. There was a dancer who came in, and we ended up, in that session, performing a dance collectively. So it's very different, because you have to be responsible for you, but you have to also be responsive to each other.

And so for our final project, we ended up going to the May Day march in the Fruitvale and creating healing chants, like healing art chants. We took the immigrants rights chants and the rhythm they had, but changed the words, so they would be about healing. And it was so awesome! And then we also created this tree, which is—it's outside, where we cut out leaves and asked the community to write what healing meant to them. What is your vision for community healing? And all of this was really to give voice, give voices to the communities themselves, so that they could say what healing looked like. I think in this world of public health, a lot of times, we think of diseases or diabetes prevention, obesity prevention, things like that [as healing], right? But if you look at the leaves, that these folks in the Fruitvale wrote, it was like, Not having police around. They didn't want the police around. Healing meant having less gun violence. Healing meant immigration reform. This is what healing really means to community, not these conjured up notions that we think are very health/behavior oriented. That was so powerful to be a part of, to say, Okay, how do we actually have community speak to what is important to them? And it was fun for us to go out there. We were in turquoise clothing, all of us, like shorts, leotards—



KWON: Wait, from top to bottom?

42:25

LAM: Yeah, so shirts, pants—It was funny. We have pictures somewhere that I have to show you—and [we did] these healing chants, and everyone else is chanting, you know, down with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], things like that. I can only say them in Spanish. So all these kinds of chants around immigration reform, and we were doing these chants around healing, which was so different. I think a lot of people thought, maybe, weird, but I was excited. It was like we were interjecting this thing. Every year, slowly, people will see that this is part of what we mean, when we want immigration reform, right?

There was one chant in particular that other people were chanting, too, and so it was almost like a call and response. Just to hear the rest of the community chant it, I was like, “Oh my God! They’re chanting our chant!” It’s catchy, and maybe they’ll remember it, you know? Around being embodied and feeling rhythm and feeling dance and feeling alive. And then there was another time that we were doing the chanting, and there was all these Korean drummers and they started playing the beat off of our rhythm, and I was like “AAH!” I just started freaking out again, because I think to me, the power is always in the collective, that I do something, and you do something, and together, we create this synergy. So in the end, all of my social justice things that really excite me are always the collective work—that we don’t know what we hold individually, but the power that we have when we come together, as a group—So that’s the Healing Arts Collective.

And then the other thing that I’ve been working on is the API Women’s Summit, which has been really exciting and how that actually came up was from this summit [pointing at poster in the room] that happened December 2012 called the Healing and Resiliency Summit. The Healing and Resiliency Summit was in response to the shooting—talking about community trauma, again—the shooting that happened April 2, 2012 at Oikos University in Oakland. So ironically—thinking about my whole life story—this is a Christian University, and it’s a private school that a lot of immigrants go to, because that’s how they can study here, because it’s private. So a lot of Tibetans, a lot of Korean folks, that’s how they can stay here in the U.S. There was a shooting and—yeah, this Korean American shot seven people. Several mental health organizations decided to have this healing summit six months later in response to this, and for the first time—I don’t want to say the first time, but it’s not very common to bring together these Asian immigrant communities. So we were trying to bring together the Korean community, Cambodian community, Vietnamese community, some of the Filipino community. I think when you think about immigrant groups, they often stay in their own ethnic group. I remember a pastor being there, a Korean pastor, and other folks, and people were so shocked to see other ethnic groups there.

44:23

Everyone was like, Wow, this is different. I thought I was only going to see Korean people, and it was like this seed of saying, Hey, it doesn't have to just be the Asian Americans—the 1.5 or second generations who come together as a pan-Asian group—that the immigrant folks can do this, too.

We were having a debrief of the summit, and we were like, Why don't we do a women's summit? Why don't we do an immigrant and refugee women's summit? And we're like, Yeah, man, we had so much fun doing this summit. It would be awesome. So that's how the API women's summit was born.

KWON: How did you end up leading it though?

47:00

LAM: I wouldn't say that I led it. I was one of the people—

KWON: Organizers. Yeah.

LAM: organizing it. Our meetings started in February, and we had initially we had Korean Community Center of the East Bay, Community Health for Asian Americans, Asian Community Mental Health Services, Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, and UC Berkeley—I was with that—Office of Women Region IX, all sitting at the table, and we're like, Yeah let's do this. Office of Women Region IX gave some money to support it, we were really excited, and Alameda County Health Care Services had some money that we could still use. I talked to folks here at Berkeley, and because the center that I'm a part of, the Center for Public Health Practice, is really big in leadership development, they pitched in. And then some of the organizations that were partners were able to donate some funds, so that's how we started coming up with this idea.

48:16

In the beginning, all we knew is that we wanted to bring immigrant women together, and that we wanted to bring together women who aren't necessarily professionalized. It wasn't like we wanted—we wanted to bring in people who don't normally get to go to conferences, and we wanted to talk about leadership, but recognizing their own leadership. So we came up with these topics of domestic violence, healing, public health, organizing, and leadership as topics that we wanted to talk about and we were thinking of having a panel of speakers, and all this stuff, but then this theme kept coming back over and over again about herstory, herstory, and really wanting to have these women tell their own stories. What does healing look like? What does being a collective really look like? So basically like the end of April, we changed everything and threw away our traditional way of having a conference and said Forget it, we're just going to have storytelling. And everyone was on-board, which I couldn't believe because there was—Oh, yeah. Alameda County Public Health Department Maternal Child Health was also in it. So there were these players, who are really used to traditional ways of doing things, but I think because we had come together for like three months and met and met. It wasn't just like

out of the blue. We were like Wait, we keep saying that we want to hear their stories, so that's we ended up doing. We ended up having a day of storytelling.

Why was that particularly powerful? It was particularly powerful because we were bringing these immigrant and refugee communities together with 1.5- and second-generation folks, so people who really may not have ever been asked what their story was, or people who've never been heard. And we're like, If we want to mobilize this community—you know, Yin—one of the things I always learned from Yin is [asking] What moves you? And you don't know what moves people until you ask them. So we came up with this theme called River of Life and wanting to hear what your river of life was, your immigration story, your family's immigration story. And then from all these different communities, What did we have in common, and thinking towards the future of How do want to connect all of our groups together.

50:04

So that's kind of how the planning came together for this, and each of us taking different roles, there were some people who were developing this popular education curriculum and even learning about what popular education was, was a new thing for our group—[this concept] of we all have things to share, and it's not just listening to the teacher. And if you think about it coming from an Asian background, for a lot of these communities, this was big. And then doing this whole pictorial thing, which we felt was really important, because everyone's coming from so many different language groups. We needed pictures to keep us together. I ended up being the facilitator kind of by default, because all these other people in the planning committee were leading their groups in their languages. So there's not that many API women left to lead, since everyone else is leading their group. So that's how I ended up holding the space to bring all the women together, but it was such an amazing event.

I was talking to Cyndi Choi earlier that week and finding out that—I guess it was twenty years ago when their Opening Doors conference [hosted by] APIRH [Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health] had happened, and they called it the “unconference.” And I was like, “Oh my gosh! That's what we did.” Even though we didn't call it the “unconference.” It was the same thing, and again to hear the women's voices from the communities themselves. So we had the Cambodian community, Mongolian community, Pacific Islander community, Nepali/Bhutanese community, Tibetan community. We had a couple of Asian-American English-speaking groups. . .

KWON:

And the Vietnamese.

53:00

LAM:

And the Vietnamese community. Thank you. It was so amazing to see all these different language groups together, and I think for a lot of the women, getting to share their story was a really big deal.

Because so many of us are into healing practices and healing community trauma, our opening session was all about healing, and that was really—I had chills, because it was so different than typical public health conferences. We had an Ohlone leader come and talk about land, and the meaning of land for her. I think it really touched the immigrant community though, because many of them had lost their land, you know. Many of the refugees, they didn't have land. So in some interesting way, there was a sacred connection between the Native folks here, who don't have their land, and these refugees, who have lost where they've lived. We had one of our Tibetan community advocates leading a chant with the entire group, which was really beautiful to see, and then we had two Cambodian Buddhist elders, who gave us—

KWON: They were so funny.

54:17

LAM: a really cute lecture on the precepts and the prohibitions of Buddhism, plus a chant. And then we did a river walk. We had women help draw with chalk, a beautiful river, and wanting to do some kind of somatic practice to just stay present in the moment, [we had participants] walk through the river and think about all the journeys that you'd taken to get here. And then we had these Vietnamese elder ladies who are having such a blast with this river activity, and rolling up their pants and surfing in the river. I think it was so great. Not only was it great to have all these different ethnic groups, it was great to have all these different ages, because to see your elders be funny and silly, I think, was really important for the college students to see, like that it was okay. And then different generational status, so people who literally just got here this year to people who've been here for three generations in this country. It was such a mix, you know? And it'll really be interesting to see how the group continues, because there are differences. When you have someone here who's a third-generation American, who has access to many things and knows how to do all this stuff, can that person stay and wait and be in the same space as an immigrant who's learning all of it for the first time and doesn't have the words and doesn't have the language? Or a college student versus someone who doesn't know how to write. So there's a lot of differences among us, and I think that we always talk about that in the API community, but this really like—you can visibly see it here, and you can see the challenges of what movement building looks like for our community, because we don't even speak the same language. Yeah, I'm really excited and excited to see how we create this movement that can last.

KWON: Did you have a chance to go into the different groups and hear some of the stories, other than the big presentation?

56:36

LAM: No. I didn't. Yeah.

KWON: What kind of feedback have you gotten about the conference, especially from the community members who haven't had an experience going to conferences?

LAM: I think the biggest thing was just them seeing that they had space to talk. That was so huge for women, especially from immigrant communities, where it's usually the men are allowed to talk, elders are allowed to talk. So like, Wow. Women can talk? and that they're heard. That's huge.

The second big thing is just that we can come together and work on issues together. I think several times, I heard like people talk about their own communities and you know, This issue's so important for us in our community, and that's what we spend most of our energy on, but not even realizing my sister from this other community's dealing with this. Wow. I didn't even know that, or like, Oh we share the same issue. It's just taking ourselves out of that box, and seeing how we can work together and things was another really big thing to see.

KWON: I'm amazed I found you. Because your life path has been sometimes intersecting Asian American reproductive justice, but also exploring different avenues to approach it. What do you see as your role within the movement? I know we've talked about other people, who have been builders and fosters—bridges. What do you see as your role?

57:51

LAM: I see myself in general as a hub, like when you think of a tire, and you think of that middle part, and there's spokes to many other things. I've always felt of myself as an outsider in every group. Always. I used to think of myself on the outside of the wheel. It was like I touched all of these things, but on the outside. And then I started to realize, Hey, I can flip that around, and I could actually be the middle in all these things [are the spokes], and it's a nice way to think of myself instead of the outcast always (laughs), so I'm trying something different.

But I think that has helped me be this string that—I feel I'm often like this string connecting many groups. And it's different than being a bridge, because a bridge is stable, and my life is very fluid. I move around a lot, and that analogy of a string that weaves in and out and in and out of all these things, but still brings them all together, I think, is more accurate of the roles that I've played. And like you said that I've been in many different spaces, but I feel the core work has always been the same, but just trying to see it from a different lens, and bring together people who many have not seen that they could've been together or they share things. So the string I guess.

KWON: OK. I just have a couple more questions. What do you envision for the future for your career? Where do you see yourself going in the future?

1:00:00

LAM: I love performing arts (laughs).

KWON: Like acting?

LAM: All of it. I was listening to someone do spoken word the other day, and I've always not—again, being an outsider, not connected myself to spoken word, because it often seems so angry. Like it seems like the urban angry voice, using rap.

KWON: Yep (laughs).

LAM: And I was like, "That's not what I do!" So people are like, Oh, you do spoken word? I'm like, "No." But then I saw this spoken word artist, who's I think from New York. I can't even remember her name. Sarah something [Sarah Kay]. She did a TED [Technology, Entertainment, Design]—

KWON: Is she a Brown grad?

LAM: I don't know. Maybe. She did a TED talk.

KWON: Yeah. She graduated from Brown.

1:00:53

LAM: Oh, really?

KWON: She comes back every other—every year, and we all like go to see her.

LAM: Oh my gosh.

KWON: We love her. And she did the whole like A to B point thing, during her TED talk, and how like her dad was like, Oh, you have really ugly hands. You should be a hand model, or some weird talk about that. You should see it. She's really good.

LAM: So I watched a TED talk of hers.

KWON: And it's very different kind of spoken word.

1:01:19

LAM: Yes! And I watched her and I'm like, "That's me! Hello!" because I talk like her, and my poetry like hers. It's not angry. It's more spiritual and philosophical and more human. It's not about an urban experience. It's about our experience in humanity, and I was like, "That is who I'm like." And I love talking in public. I think that's why people always ask me to do MC stuff, because I'm very comfortable. It doesn't frighten me. I want to do stuff like that.

So in doing all this social justice work, doing direct service, doing research, doing evaluations, doing teaching, building up a non-profit, writing grants, like I've seen the impact—like that's the positive thing of what I've gotten out of this lifetime, why I've come back is to see the impact of different ways of being. And I'm at the point in my life now where I want to go big, like I want to do stuff in the public sphere, because that's where you touch everyone. Like that's why the chants—when I saw other people chanting with us, I was like “This.” I just started thinking about music and literature and movies, and I'm like, “Those people influence everybody.” Imagine being able to write a song or a piece of work or a play that *everyone* watches; that's social change. So that's where I want to go next. I want my work to be published. I would love to do a song, or to help us put these values of social justice into our public discourse. That's why I love public performance. I love public performance—using public space, murals, crazy art on sidewalks, because it's regular people that see them. And the thing that I've always been drawn to in all of my work is the people, like the on the ground, regular folks, which is why academia is so hard for me. How do we do things that are accessible to normal people? And I think the NAPAWF project, the API women's summit, Street Level, it's all been that of How do we get accessible to people who are usually left out? So that's where I see my social justice happening next.

KWON:

What kind of artwork do you do? You said you did poetry?

1:04:19

LAM:

Yeah, so I write poetry but also children's stories. My poetry's been on the really deep sad existential side, just of a lot of healing through the sexual trauma, but I find it's powerful for a lot of people who are needing to heal. For me, talking about things that are so raw and other people being able to know that their experience isn't singular, I think that's why I write what I write, so that people don't feel alone; because we do. When something bad happens to us, we always think that we're the only ones who something bad happen to, and you just kind of close yourself in. Healing, to me, comes from realizing you're a part of a group, and integrating yourself back into that group, and integrating yourself back into your body. Trauma is all about isolation and separation, and healing is all about coming back and integrating.

So I did this mixed media installation called “I am not Dante,” which is the featured piece of this five-poem installation. I picked five, because of the five elements, and being Chinese, trying to bring those elements in and find a poem that connected to each of those elements and talking about healing, that healing requires us to go through all of the elements and intersecting and blending with the death, in order to come to life. So yeah, it's called I'm not Dante, so it is dark and based on Dante's *Inferno*.

1:05:25

This death theme has kind of followed me, because this summer I started being part of a new women's project called the Siren Project, Women Creating Wellness Centers [correction: women creating communities of wellness through art]. And again, it's using art as healing for women, so they have a theater production that's coming out in September called, "Of Divinity and Demons and the Humanity in Between." It's about death. The title of the theater is Death on the River Ganges. I'm also part of the book anthology that's basically looking at—asking for women to write about their experiences with death. And so I found this new group that I'm so excited about, because they're doing healing work with women, with arts. Completely perfect, so I feel like that's a way for me to do that stuff, too. And then I have these children's stories, and that's what I love the best, man. I love telling children's stories.

KWON: Have you shared them with your kids?

1:07:30

LAM: Yeah, not only that—

KWON: Did they like them?

LAM: Yeah, but I also shared them in their classroom. So we have [Career] Read-Aloud every year. And so usually every year what I do is I do a new story and have the kids illustrate it, and then we perform it together.

KWON: Aww. That's so exciting

LAM: And it's so fun. So those are my ultimate things, but it's almost coming back full circle, coming home, coming back to what I see as—like how it's children and how we have to cultivate healing and justice from the beginning, and for those of us who get messed up along the way, which happens to all of us, that we go through it together.

KWON: Well, that's all the questions I have. Do you have anything else that you wanted to add to the oral history?

1:08:20

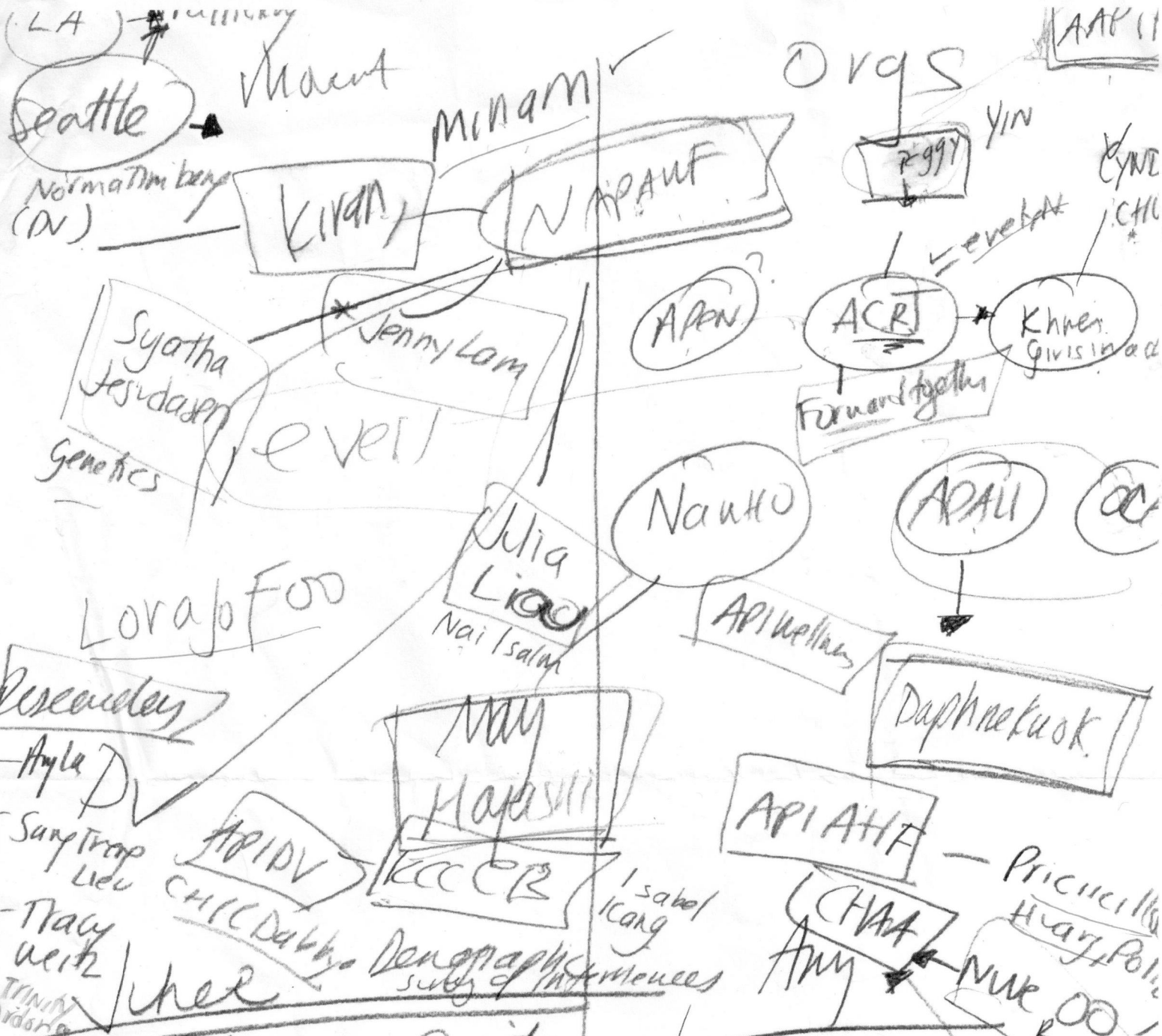
LAM: Actually, just to add how I actually think this movement of healing arts is going to pick up. Big. Just using arts in general. So NAPAWF, last year [in] 2012, they did a rendition of the Vagina Monologues at the Castro Theater, which is huge. NAPAWF traditionally has done very social justice-y organizing campaigns, but this group of NAPAWF Bay Area sisters is very artistic. So they decided to put all their efforts in doing this play, and they got so much publicity. I mean, these API women doing Vagina Monologues in the Castro Theater? And that's just such a different thing that NAPAWF—it's not traditionally seen as what NAPAWF does.



In so many spaces I see that women are starting to take their voice beyond protest to creation, and I think that's the beauty to watch this movement be about creating and cultivating and healing as opposed to just resistance, protest, which I think were the early forms of how we acted. Resistance is important and protest is important, but it gets tiring, and so I think many of us in the movement are wanting to find different ways that are more life giving.

KWON: Well, thank you so much.

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