

Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

MIA MINGUS

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

August 5, 2013
Oakland, California

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Royce Fellowship

Narrator

Mia Mingus (b. 1980) is a writer, community educator and organizer working for disability justice and transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse. She identifies as a queer physically disabled Korean woman transracial and transnational adoptee, born in Korea, raised in the Caribbean, nurtured in the U.S. South, and now living on the west coast. She works for community, interdependency and home for all of us, not just some of us, and longs for a world where disabled children can live free of violence, with dignity and love. As her work for liberation evolves and deepens, her roots remain firmly planted in ending sexual violence.

Mingus received her B.A. in Women's Studies from Agnes Scott College in Georgia. At the age of 26, Mingus was named the co-Executive Director of SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW, based in Atlanta, Georgia. Currently, Mia is a core-member of the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC), a local collective working to build and support transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse that do not rely on the state (i.e. police, prisons, the criminal legal system). She believes in prison abolition and urges all activists to critically and creatively think beyond the non-profit industrial complex. Her work on disability justice has been cited and used in numerous texts and events around the world.

Most recently, Mia was recognized by the White House as a Champion of Change, an honor bestowed on Americans doing exemplary things to uplift their communities. Along with 14 other women, Mia was recognized as an Asian and Pacific Islander women's Champion of Change in observance of Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. Mia was a 2005 New Voices Fellow, was named one of the Advocate's 40 Under 40 in 2010, one of the 30 Most Influential Asian Americans Under 30 in 2009 by Angry Asian Man, one of Campus Pride's Top 25 LGBT Favorite speakers for their 2009, 2010 and 2011 HOT LISTS, and was listed in *Go Magazine's* 2013 100 Women We Love. Mia was honored with the 2008 Creating Change Award (below) by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and a community activist award for her "dedication and steadfast activism" in 2007 by ZAMI in Atlanta, GA.

Interviewer

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

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. One file: 1 hr 43 min 42 sec.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Mia Mingus.

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Transcript of interview conducted August 5, 2013, with:

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Oakland, California

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: There we go. All right. This is Juhee Kwon. Today is August 5, 2013. I'm here with Mia Mingus. Is that right?

MINGUS: Mhmm.

KWON: Okay. In her home in Oakland, California, and this is a part of the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project. So thank you so much. We're going to start at the very beginning like I told you. So if you could start with where you were born, how you grew up and things like that.

MINGUS: Sure. Yeah, thank you for having me on your show (laughs). I am an adoptee, so I was born in Korea. I was born in Pusan, and then I was adopted when I was six months old to St. Croix in the U.S. V.I.—the U.S. Virgin Islands, and I was raised there till I was 17, and then I moved to go to school. I moved to Atlanta, Georgia. I went to Agnes Scott College, which is a small all-women's school in the South. I grew up in the Caribbean and then ended up kind of cutting my teeth in organizing in the South. I stayed in Atlanta for 13 years, so.

KWON: Could you elaborate a little bit more about growing up in the Virgin Islands? I don't know really what the racial, ethnic make-up of that area is.

MINGUS: Yeah definitely. So there's not a lot of Korean people.

KWON: (laughs) Surprise.

MINGUS: Unless they're like adopted by other people. There's like maybe—I think at the time, there was a family living—there was a doctor, Doctor Park, who was living on the island. So him and his family were the only Korean people that I knew of who were not adoptees.

But St. Croix is pretty much like—you know, there's a lot of Caribbean folks, so there's a lot of Puerto Rican people, people from down islands or Trinidad Tobago. There's people from—who have—there's a

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lot of migration across the Caribbean, so there's people from all over. And then there's a smaller yet significant Black/African-American population or people who have moved down from the States and then there's a pretty significant White stateside population of people who have—and they range the gambit from people who—at the time when I was working there, Hess Oil was one of the largest companies there, and so they would bring a lot of people down for skilled labor and then pull manual labor from the people who were on the island. So a lot of people came from there, ranging from millionaires who had vacation homes or—and there's some weird thing about St. Croix where there's some weird loophole that you can get for taxes if you have a house there or something. I never really—Maybe that was an urban myth but that's what people said. And then there's a lot of middle class White people, who just kind of ended up there, because they wanted to live in the Caribbean.

So my adoptive parents were those types of folks. They came and visited their friends, or they—my mom went down to be a teacher for a year, to have “fun in the sun” is the way she describes it, and my dad was visiting a friend of his and just kind of fell in love with the island. So they were both there and then adopted myself and then my sister. Both of us are from Korea. I have a little bit of different experience than a lot of other Korean adoptees who are in the States, because I grew up around a lot of people of color, actually, because it's really diverse. But there's not a lot of East Asian people at all. There's a pretty significant, small significant, South Asian population, but—so it was weird. I grew up with this really deep sense of [race] and framework around racism and had an identity of somebody and understood myself to be a person of color, which feels really different than a lot of the narratives that I know coming out of the Midwest or Minnesota or Northeast or what have you, where people don't have kind of a framework to even put themselves into.

And at the same time, the year when I was adopted, my mother along with nine other women, founded the Women's Coalition of St. Croix, and they're a domestic violence organization, and they help victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault. One of the founding members is Audre Lorde. So it's through that work [that] there was a profound, really strong, political framework. You know, I grew up in this really close-knit, strong feminist community that was all around this organization, building the organization from the ground up. And so we would have conversations, you know, we'd talk about white supremacy at the dinner table, people knew what homophobia was, you know? There were lesbian couples that were part of our community, who had been together for like twenty years, ten years, and you know, it wasn't like an issue; it was just *that's* who they were. And so I had like that, but I think that—and then I had this other piece of the political framework that wasn't so much about an analysis around oppressions, but that was also about a deep sense of justice and service and what activism means—and it's weird to even call it activism because so much of it feels like it's just my life's work. You

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know, it's not like this special thing I do on the side or anything; it's just how you live your life, and what it means to actually mobilize people.

So I grew up in that, and I grew up around a lot of—the group that founded the coalition was a very multi-racial group of women of color, White women. I feel like from a young age, I really got a profound sense of, one, just seeing women organizing for themselves, when no one else would, and internalizing into my bones that you don't need a college special course to do activism, you don't need to go to a fancy training, you don't need to know fancy language, or speak the “right” way or all these ridiculous things that we're taught now, and that the way that political work I feel like gets professionalized and this elitism around it. I just feel like from growing in that environment, I just saw people just being like, There's a need in our community. We need to do something. How do we create what we need? And it's not perfect, you learn as you go, but they did it, and it's still alive now.

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And then the other thing I feel like I got from that experience growing up was just this deep profound understanding of violence and how systemic it was and how pervasive it was. And that it wasn't just the five—it wasn't just like my friends who were like experiencing violence, but it was everybody, particularly intimate violence, which is mostly what they worked on, but they worked on intimate violence in the context—like everybody does—of state violence, of all kinds of community violence, of everything. I remember spending Saturday afternoons in the waiting room, playing with kids as their moms went in and out to the counselors. In the early early days, people would spend the night at our house to escape in the middle of the night to fly off the island, because you can't just drive to the next county or anything. I didn't have the language for it, but I knew that it was larger than just a couple of bad people, you know what I mean? It was so many people and so many families, and so many different kinds of families. It wasn't just about poor people, it wasn't about just women of color, it wasn't—None of that mattered. It was all kinds of different folks, and I definitely got a deep sense of the engendered piece of—or I don't know if that's the correct way to say it—but the gender piece of how violence is perpetuated, particularly around women, folks who are identified as female, people who present as feminine, people who present as women, people who are mistaken as women, all of those things felt really profound as well.

I don't know that I would've had the fancy words to describe it then, but I know that I also came to a place inside of myself, like something—it's like tectonic plates or something—something just shifted and aligned where I didn't want to just be part of responding to violence, but I really wanted to be a part of making the violence stop. Because even though I knew that the work that my mom's organization did and the work that the women and the people who were in that community did all the time—which ranged from everything from being part of the advocate hotline and going in the middle of the night to assist victims to running the

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beeper training program to helping to train the police to helping to run the organization to everything, to helping to cook the meals for the meeting. There was collective childcare all the time, because most of the people who were doing the main work were a lot of single mothers. There were a lot of people who didn't have dual income households. There was a lot of death, there were a lot of hard times, and St. Croix has a lot of poverty on it as well. I saw that type of work, and so I knew it was really good work, but I also knew that it wasn't lessening the incidences of violence, and it was helping to create a culture where people could come out about violence and where people could address the consequences of violence and the impact of violence, but [it was] not necessarily doing anything to shift the reasons why violence was happening. And I don't say that with any judgment, because I know and I've seen literally first hand as their organization just continues to grow, and they're still at capacity. Like they literally cannot help all the people who need help, and I think that's true for most of our direct service organizations, who are doing great work on the front lines—and you know, I mean obviously it's never—it's not perfect, and there's a lot of critiques that people have and that I have as well and like I have a lot of respect for those people who are doing work in the trenches and on the front lines because it's not easy work and they often times don't have the support that they need like in terms of—everything from like the constant intake of trauma that they have to the long hours to the little amounts of pay—all that kind of stuff. But I think there was something about that kind of direct and immediate needs work that I saw that I just knew I wanted to be a part of building alternatives and like I said, at the time, I don't think I really had that language, but I feel like that really shaped me in terms of how I understood the rest of my political work.

KWON: Yeah, and so you eventually moved down to the South. But was that because you had gone to college there or did you find something in the South that you felt like you needed to change or you really enjoyed [working in] that social context?

11:17

MINGUS: You know, it's funny. I moved into the South. I never thought I would end up in the South. I didn't know where I was going to end up. I was so like—I wasn't going to go to college, then I was. Such a middle class privilege. Anyways, I ended up in the South, because I just had one of those experiences that I know people talk about—It's so ridiculous, but—where I had gone to see lots of colleges, or I'd heard about lots of colleges, and I was at the point where I was like—I didn't like them. I hated school, just in general. I didn't want to go to school. I just got into so much trouble in school, so I just didn't want to go back. I wasn't like the best student either, and so—I went to Agnes Scott—well, no, my dad's best friend's brother-in-law works at Agnes Scott, and so he sent us a pamphlet, because he had heard through the grapevine that I was looking

for a school. It was one of those things where as soon as I got it, I just kind of knew that that was the place that I wanted to go to. It was a small liberal arts women's college, and I didn't know anything about Atlanta—I mean it's located—it's technically in Decatur, but it's in Atlanta, like ten minutes outside of Atlanta. I didn't know anything about that area, I didn't—you know, I had no idea.

KWON: Was it any—(inaudible)

MINGUS: But I just like had this feeling, and I feel like that's been a lot of my life. I just had this feeling like, This is where I'm going to go, and if I don't get in—and I remember saying to my parents, I was like, “If I don't get into this school, then I just won't go to college. I'll figure out something else.” And then I got in, and yeah. A lot of it was also like I needed a small, like a literally physically small campus to just be able to get around on, in terms of access-wise. But I also just had this feeling about it, and I went there and I loved it. And like I said—I mean, it's not perfect either. Nothing's perfect, but I really had a great time, like given the ups and downs.

And then I ended up falling in love with the South, and specifically falling in love with Atlanta, which I didn't expect either. And you know, looking back on it now, and I feel like as I matured more in the South, the similarities between the Caribbean and the South are so deep, and so I feel like that was also part of it, like just feeling really familiar and a sense of home in ways that I didn't really expect or know about. Like having grown up around a lot of Black people and a lot of Brown and Black people of color, having always had a sense of ease and comfortableness with Blackness and Black people that I think a lot of non-black people don't really have, or it's harder unless you like have that. And that was something that was never like an issue, you know? And I think also the land—like I loved—springtime in the South is just gorgeous. And then the people that I met in Atlanta were just wonderful people, and I still have connections with them to this day, but I didn't know anything like—in terms of a political framework around the South, and I feel like I got that a lot more from people as I got into political work.

And I got scholarships to be able to go to school, so I had this like community service scholarship, because I was always very involved, like all through high school and stuff. Mostly because I really didn't like school. So the moment I got there, in order to maintain those scholarships, I had to like volunteer at different organizations and get involved and have a certain amount of hours, which was really a blessing because I feel like it—I didn't just end up in that college bubble like a lot of people do. I ended up being able to—you know, I met Loretta Ross I think in the first month I was in Atlanta. I didn't even know who she was, you know, and I was volunteering at the National Human Rights Education Center [correction: National Center for Human Rights Education], NCHRE,

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whatever the acronym [is], but that's the human rights organization that she used to do that was like before SisterSong. And I remember it was run out of her kitchen, out of her house, so we'd go to her house and work with Sarah, at the time, who was the only staff person, I think, besides Loretta. But Loretta she was of course running around the country and the world, speaking and being this famous activist or whatever. Yeah, so things like that and that I think was also what kept me. [It] was because I was able to really get connected to work that was going on and—I don't know, and I think Atlanta just felt like home in a lot of ways, you know? I came out there as a queer person; I feel like queer people of color community was really vibrant there, and so it was something that saved my life in a lot of ways, you know?

KWON: What was it like going to a women's college? I just personally have never had that experience, but I know a lot of people choose women's colleges because they say it's more empowering and that experience is really different. Can you speak a little to that?

16:23

MINGUS: I mean, I don't know. It wasn't that much different for me because it felt like where I grew up, because I was surrounded by women all the time. But I liked it—I feel like I chose it less because it was a women's college and more because I just liked that it was small, and there was a cozy feeling to it. But I did like going to a women's college. I remember I would visit some of my friends on spring break or things at their universities, and I was like, I don't even understand how you do this. I mean, just the space that men took up in their classes and the distraction, like just you know, just saying ridiculous things all the time and wasting everybody's time all the time. I was just like, I don't even understand how you do this.

And then I think too, at least for me, I wasn't really interested in dating men or anything like that, or dating anybody really at that point in my life. So it just wasn't even an issue, because at that point, I was like—I had like boyfriends all through high school and lower school, or whatever, middle school, and so I was like—I was still saying—what was I saying—that textbook thing of like, I'm just Mia. I'm not gay, I'm not straight, I'm just Mia. Like everybody does—or not everybody, but a lot of us do, so yeah. I think that Agnes Scott was—I think for me, it wasn't as much of a culture shock, but I know that for a lot of people—well, I mean women's colleges across the board, it's like people either love it or they hate it, and [if] they don't—there's not really a lot of in-between, so they have a lot of transfers, I think the first year across that board, of people who are like, I want to be with men. (laughs) I don't know what it is, but maybe who just don't like the school, but—I'm like, Don't quote those parts. (laughs)

KWON: Probably true. What did you do after you graduated? Did you stay in Atlanta?

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MINGUS:

So I graduated—barely—with a Women’s Studies degree, and I’m like one of the only people, I think, who’s not a professor, who actually uses her degree, which is exciting. What did I do. . .? Oh, right. So I graduated, and I didn’t really know what I was going to do with my life, again, I was just like, I just want to do activism, all the time. And I don’t understand why I can’t do that. And then I didn’t have anything planned. I knew I didn’t want to go back to school, so I didn’t want to continue school. I loved Atlanta, so I knew I wanted to stay in Atlanta, and then I literally walked into the independent feminist bookstore there, Charis Books & More, and I said, “I need a job. I think you all should hire me.” And they said, Actually, leave your number. We’re looking for somebody, and then like a week later, I had a job. It was so random, like it was—yeah, again, like one of those things that it was just like, What?

So I worked there for two years, and that was really great, actually. I mean, through working at Charis, I feel like I really—one, I got to meet tons of people. I got to meet the whole feminist community because a lot of people, you know, people were really committed to buying their books at an independent bookstore. I got to learn a lot about the independent feminist bookstore movement and about publishing and women’s writing, and what it means to be—and particularly around lesbian and queer women’s writing. I got to see a lot firsthand of transphobia from lesbian communities and queer women communities to trans communities, and kind of learn about that struggle or learn about that conflict. And at the time, I was still so young, I didn’t really know a lot about the history around that, you know, the history of the queer movement being sparked by trans women of color, like all of those things. So it was a good learning experience.

And there are a lot of complications in that, too, and by that time, I was out or had come out and had my first girlfriend and everything. And so it was great, too, because I got to meet tons of queer community through that. And I got to be around books all the time. It was just like a great little job, you know? It didn’t pay anything. There’s like no health insurance. Sometimes we didn’t even get paid (laughs). But I really liked it.

My college, Agnes Scott had this fifth year free program, so you could take any classes you wanted to your fifth year, and I mean, some people, if they have money to live off of, they could do a whole full-ride, but I was able to take like one course a semester, in between my working and non-working. So that was really nice, too.

Yeah, and it was through Charis that I met a lot of the feminist community, a lot of the activist community, and then was involved with Queer Girls, which we started, which we threw like—for a little while, it was like every other month, but I think it became just quarterly—house parties and those became huge, and it was all queer women. It was just sometimes—I think the parties towards the end were like over 100 people,

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all the time, and they were just floating parties. But it was really great because at the time, there was really nowhere to go, if you were a queer woman of color, besides the kind of like white dyke bars and things like that. There was nowhere to go that was free, where you could really dance and be with people. So that was fun too.

And yeah, and then I left that [Charis Books & More] and I went to go work at Georgians for Choice, and I had been volunteering with Georgians for Choice, which was like—I volunteered with NARAL and Georgians for Choice, the national—what's NARAL? National Abortion Reproductive Rights Action League. That's what it was. The GARAL part of that—the Georgia branch—and then Georgians for Choice. They were two pro-choice organizations, and I've been doing that since I was in Agnes Scott as part of that whole community service thing. So I had been a volunteer, and then when I was thinking about leaving Charis, so many things happened.

The people who lived next door to me, moved—no, no, no. I moved into a house, and the person living next door worked at Georgians for Choice. Her name was Errin Vuley, and she's a white woman, she's a white queer woman. We became friends, and then she was like—and I was like volunteering with them, and kind of involved. And then she approached me because she heard about this fellowship called New Voices, and she was like, We want to apply for this fellowship, and I want you to be the fellow because we had like worked together. I was like, "Okay." So we applied for it, and it was like this thing where through AED [NAME?] and the Ford Foundation was the original funder of it. You apply with an organization, and they fund the organization and the fellow for two years to basically work at this organization and you do work for them. You submit a proposal for a project and the work you're going to do, but basically it's like a free staff person and then you get all this leadership development. But really, they're funding the fellow. So it's not [for the organization]—it is. They give money to the organization, but it's really—because there were fellows who ended up having to leave their organization, and they took the grant with them, which was kind of amazing. So we applied.

I was working at Charis at the time, and things were kind of falling apart there, in terms of—I didn't want to stay and then (pauses). So many things happened all at once. We heard. It was like spring of 2004, I think, or [200]5. Spring of 2005. We heard we didn't get in, and I was actually the first runner up. They choose fifteen people, and it's really really competitive. And so I was number sixteen, and they were like, You didn't get in, but you're the first runner up, so if somebody drops out, then you'll be bumped up. And we were like, Oh that's great. Does that ever happen? And they were like, It's only happened once in the whole history of the entire thing, and so we were like, Urg. Okay.

So I was like trying to figure out what I was going to do—and then what happened? And then there was like a month where I reconnected

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with my birth family in Korea, and that same week, the New Voices people called and said, Somebody has dropped out and you have the fellowship. And you have to be in Chicago or somewhere in July or something. This was like April or June. And so then I ended up getting that, which is how I got into the reproductive justice—like formally, I mean, other than like volunteering, yeah.

KWON: Can you tell me a little bit about your trip back to Korea?

MINGUS: Yeah (laughs).

KWON: Yeah, I'm really interested.

MINGUS: So—well, about my first trip, back, which happened like year later.

KWON: Really?

MINGUS: So I didn't go back, they—

KWON: They came?

MINGUS: No, no. So basically my sister had been looking for her family. She didn't find anything. She hit a dead end, and she emailed what the caseworker had sent her to our family. And in her email, she was like, You know, Mia, you might want to just email them, like their email's right here, and just see if they have anything. And I was like, "Oh I don't know, you know." And then so I was like, "Why not?" So I emailed them, and I was like "Hey, here's my case number," whatever, and like immediately, they email me back. And they're like, We're so happy you've emailed us and contacted us. Your family's been looking for you for the past year. We have pictures. We have letters. I'll scan them and fax them to you right away. Is that possible? And so I was like, "Oh. Oh, okay." And then from there, it was just—yeah, they were like, Is it okay if we share y'all's information with each other, and then I started talking with them, and then a year later, I went back to Korea for the first time since being adopted. And it was great. My community did a fundraiser for me, and they raised all the money and including the SkyMiles and free tickets to get us there, so I was able to go back. I just got back from my third trip seeing them, two months ago.

26:29

KWON: Oh wow. So you keep in touch with them?

MINGUS: Yeah, yeah

KWON: Sweet. Had that been a big part of your identity? Being a transnational Korean adoptee?

27:47

MINGUS: It hadn't really. I mean, I had thought about it and stuff, and I knew about it, but not publicly. It had never been publicly part of my identity. And then I think after that, it became much more so—and maybe even a little bit before that, I was learning more about just like people doing that work in terms of the movement around—I don't even know if it's a movement, but yeah, the movement around transracial and transnational adoption. I already had a critique around adoption by then, through reproductive—well, at *that* time, I mean, I don't even know if it was being called reproductive justice because it was still really new, and it was still kind of—People were still saying things like, Reproductive health plus social justice, and calling it that. So through that, I had an analysis of it, but then I learned a lot more through *Outsiders Within* and reading different things. Then I got a much more clear analysis. And then just my own analysis around reproductive justice and population control and stealing of children and all of that, I feel like really helped to deepen my sense—

But I also only came into my political identity as a disabled person in my second... third, my third year of college. So I was still like relatively new in that, too. I think after meeting my family, starting to—and just that whole [process of] getting in touch with them, maybe the first [year], the year before that, and that whole time really connecting all the dots of disability, the violence in the medical industrial complex, connected to the violence of adoption, connected to the violence of the diaspora and the violence of the Korean war and all of those things and putting analysis and the framework that I already had onto my own life, which I think that—it was also too close or something.

29:11

But at the same time, I also feel like—you know, I say this all the time—I think that I could only handle one thing because they were huge things like coming outs and coming ins or however you want to describe them. You know, coming into myself as queer and as somebody who was not a lesbian and who really identified as a queer person and like the depth of what queerness meant and all of that was so huge. Coming into myself politically as disabled, all those all of those pieces. And I feel like growing up, I really had the chance to come into myself as a feminist and [understand] what it meant to be like a girl or a woman, and then a girl of color and a woman of color. I'm kind of like, Thank God they happened one at a time, because I think I would've—I think it was too much, you know?

30:08

KWON: When you do your speaking, like the things that you do at different universities and events, do you introduce yourself as that long—

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MINGUS: I do.

KWON: What is the identifier that you use for yourself?

MINGUS: I say that I'm a queer—(laughs) queer disabled woman of color transracial and transnational Korean adoptee. It's very long, and I could add more things but I'm just like, It's too long already. Yeah.

KWON: So when did you finally embrace your full identity with that whole huge long identifier?

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MINGUS: I think it was like right around that time, actually. All of those things really started to come together and then it was—I mean, because it wasn't like I hid those other identities. They were totally a part of things, but I don't think I was—I feel like I entered it into a new level. And at the time, I was coming into myself as a political disabled person, but I hadn't gotten disability justice yet because there was no such thing as disability justice at that time. So it was really in the next two years that that framework and that concept even became a word or term that people used, so yeah.

KWON: Okay so you were talking about the fellowship, right?

32:11

MINGUS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KWON: And you got it with Georgians for Choice. Could you talk a little bit more about that, too, and what kind of work you did?

MINGUS: Yes. So my job—Oh my gosh. It's like ancient history. My fellowship was. . .

KWON: (laughs) It wasn't that long ago.

MINGUS: I know, right? But so many things have happened. It's so hard! I mean, because Erin has died since then. She was in a car accident and died. My job at that time was supposed to be the Access Project Coordinator, and the Access Project was a program of Georgians for Choice that was about—one, they had made this access guide, which is basically like a pamphlet—no, it was larger than a pamphlet. It was like a booklet that [contained] all [the] local resources and places that people could go to get any type of reproductive thing you can imagine, whether it's testing of HIV/AIDS, whether it's getting a pap smear, whether it was hormonal treatments, whether it was abortions, whether it was gynecological exams, anything like that. It was a booklet, and it had lists of places you could go to and their information. And it also had just like information, so it had information about safer sex, and it had—just all kinds of stuff. They had done the first one of that two years, I think, before I came on and that was around the March for Women's Lives time.

KWON: Were you involved in that? Did you go to the march?

33:49

MINGUS: I did go to the march. How did I get to the March?

KWON: It was in D.C., wasn't it?

MINGUS: Yeah, we drove to the march, but it was like, my friends and I drove to the march. Yeah, we weren't on the bus. That was drama.

KWON: Oh my gosh. Tell me about the march.

MINGUS: The march was great, and totally not accessible and—Washington D.C. that long strip that we were on, where everybody was congregating on, not accessible, and at that time, I was in my wheelchair, so I had this very disabled life, even though I wasn't like, "Yes, disabled people!" yet, you know. It was very crowded, and it was fun to hear all the speakers and stuff but I wasn't really part of the organizing of it, and I heard that there was a lot of drama, particularly around the Georgia part of it, and buses not showing up or just all kinds of things. And then you know, just the relationship between national organizations and local organizations, which is like the next chapter of my life that I'm about to tell you. But it was—yeah, so it was fun to like see everybody, but I really didn't—I mean, I couldn't really see that much because I was in my wheelchair, and it was like—yeah, I mean, it took forever to get through the crowds because people just don't have any cognizance of it and then there was like a million people, so you couldn't really get through anything. And I think we drove all night and got up there, we stayed in a random hotel—God, I cannot even remember actually now—and we just turned right back around and came back, so it was really fast. But I remember being excited that I was there, and it felt like something to do.

At the time, it was like—it's true in a lot of ways now, there are really just two branches in terms of feminist work that you can do. You can go into pro-choice and reproductive rights, health, or justice work or you can go into anti-violence and domestic violence and sexual assault, rape work. And I had done that [anti-violence] work, so I was like you know, this is the branch of the tree that I'm doing now, and it was great to see—well I had gone with my partner at the time, who's White, and then my two close friends who are both Black women, and it was great to see like women of color there and present, but you know, I think—I didn't really understand and I don't know if everybody else understood what it was for, you know what I mean? What was after the march?

KWON: Right, right.

MINGUS: So it felt like there was all this energy and the things is now as an organizer, looking back, I'm like, Oh I wish that I was a part of it. And I totally give props to them for getting all those people there. It's phenomenal and amazing—Can I curse on your interview?

36:34

KWON: (laughs)

MINGUS: Fucking amazing. So it's not to belittle that in any way shape or form, and I think just as a movement, movements as a whole, we just have to be better at coordination and strategy. Because I think a lot of people there, who weren't in the inner circles and formally connected to organizations or in the movements didn't really—I don't know what they did after they went to the march, you know what I mean? So that—that was the march (laughs)

KWON: (laughs) Awesome. OK.

MINGUS: Well, is this like useful?

37:21

KWON: Yeah, yeah. It is.

MINGUS: It feels like I'm rambling about ridiculous stories. (laughs)

KWON: (laughs) All going to go into history. What were we talking about? Oh, so more Georgians for Choice. So you did it—

MINGUS: Right, right. So I was supposed to redo the Access the guide and update that which was like a pain in the fucking ass.

KWON: Kind of tedious.

MINGUS: Oh my God.

KWON: Yeah, that's really tedious.

MINGUS: And like you had to re-update all the contact people, people would have moved, different staff members would be gone, they'd be offering different services, new services, they wouldn't have gotten funding for this part of service—you know, it's just like ridiculous.

I was supposed to do that and then other part of the Access Project was these taskforces that were basically—I mean, they were called taskforces. Yeah, but basically they were like little caucuses. No, they were taskforces, I guess. But we just brought together the abortion provider taskforce, there was the clinic taskforce, there was—now I can't even remember all of them, but they brought together all the people doing work on that [particular service], supposedly statewide. I mean they were okay, but I think—well, one, just doing work in the South, having the opportunity to really cut my teeth doing organizing, people were just at capacity. They didn't have time to do that kind of stuff, and there was no—you know, Georgians for Choice was a coalition, so it really saw

itself as like a conduit and the gatherer, bringing people together. I don't think that—and that was something that the coalition had struggled with as well and were still struggling with was—and I think all coalitions really struggle with this—How much guidance do you give? Do we just bring people together and then let them just go however they want to or do we have values and principles like, Actually, no. We have thoughts and ideas of where we think we should go and what we think we should be doing. But how do you do that in a way that really supports member's work that doesn't take away from what they're doing and that doesn't drain their resource and that doesn't come into competition with the goals and the projects that they're doing, all that type of regular shit that just everyone has in terms of coalition that I think the movement itself was really struggling with as well.

We had this march, and I think a lot of people had thought it was going to really reinvigorate the movement, and I don't think it really did, and I think there was a lot of learning from it in terms of the amount of resources that were drained, and the toll it took on local organizations, and then a lot of rifts and breaks that it created between national and local folks, and a lot of rifts and breaks it created between national folks, too, you know, turf wars, all that kind of stuff. You had the OGs [Old Guards], the big white OG women, the NOWs and the Planned Parenthoods. They have millions of dollars to put behind things or they had donors who can give millions of dollars to put behind things. And then you have a lot smaller organizations like Georgians for Choice and then what became SPARK Reproductive Justice Now, who don't have that.

And so I think that the movement was really struggling, too, and we were also at a time where, especially in Georgia, the reproductive health and the folks doing service work were really being hit hard all the time. I mean, just the anti-choice and the religious right, in terms of—not just Georgia but across the South and the Midwest, they were just doing such a good job organizing and mobilizing their folks and really moving through a lot of proactive pieces of legislation across the South and then across the Midwest, and rolling out these dangerous pieces of legislation that were—I mean, and what we would talk about all the time is just like—I think what they were really successful at doing was controlling and dictating the conversation. We were having to scramble to hit the ball back and try to make it for the last minute emergency hearings that they would have, and all this kind of bullshit that was just really tough on providers and that was also creating—not creating, that was also revealing a lot of the gaps within local organizing.

It was just revealing how much distance and how far in left field a lot of the advocates and the lobbyists really were. They were not connected to the people, who were actually doing work in the trenches, and what was actually going on in their own communities. It was like very funder driven, and it was very much about, Well, we're fighting this bill because we think it will look good to our funders, and what we would hear

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in terms of being in the coalition, what we would hear is from—because we actually had a connection to the clinics and often times, they were like, Actually, we don't need them to fight against this bill. If they would work on *this*, that would actually directly impacts us, and this would be better. But there was no conversation between those two groups, and then reproductive justice was this newer approach that was starting to form, and then there was also no communication, three ways, happening across those things. There was a lot of fighting between this new—and I don't mean to say, "new," I should say ever emerging and evolving—RJ [reproductive justice] framework, and a lot of the Old Guards, who were doing pro-choice work who had a lot of the resources and a lot of the money, and who had—like I said before, I totally give them credit for—they had really branded and messaged, really well, a movement that RJ was really bumping up against in a lot of ways. There was just so much going on there, and at the time, I was hired to do the Access Project, and then a year and a half later, before my fellowship even ended, I became one of the co-Executive Directors. We were the first time that there had ever been a—I think I was one of the youngest Asian co-executive directors in RJ at that point, and then my other co-executive director, Pair Hatcher, was an African-American woman, and we were at that time, as far as I knew, we were the only multi-racial—in terms of Black and Asian—leadership happening from one organization, and we were doing this from the deep South. And then—

KWON: So Georgians for Choice had turned into SPARK?

44:32

MINGUS: So at the time, it was still GFC, Georgians for Choice, when we became—and once we became executive directors, we trans-positioned the organization into a reproductive justice organization, and that was one of our first priorities. We changed the name and we really changed all of our priorities, but I think also, *we* didn't necessarily know what we were doing. There was no support for us. We really had to fight to get SPARK and to make that happen, and we had to fight for horizontal structure—a lot of people, our board, was not excited about a co-directorship, and it wasn't—they were like, How are people going to know who's in charge? You know, all these things. Now the climate is much more—it's still very hard, but it's much more open. More people are doing horizontal leadership structures, which I think are really important, and then you know, I think also we were getting a lot of attacks as young women and young women leadership, internally, from the reproductive rights people and leaders and then from the reproductive justice older women of color leaders as well. And that was just really really hard. I remember that was a really hard time, and [we] just tried to forward this little organization. At that time, too, there were all the turf wars around SisterSong of who *owns* reproductive justice and who's allowed to say it? Does ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice] own it? Does SisterSong own it?

Because it was still new—newer, and then I was also close with Cara Page, who worked at CWPE, the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment, and I really credit a lot of their work with my analysis around population control and forced sterilization and all that work that they were doing.

So all that's to say is that I think that's part of the transition but then—I had at least the structure of like New Voices to support me, and through that program, they gave me money, but they also were like, You had to choose a mentor and make sure you met with that mentor like once a month or something like that. And through that, I was able to get mentors, which was really crucial, because there was and still I feel like, there's just not a lot of leadership development support. And I wasn't really connected with the Asian women leaders, who were out here on the West Coast, because doing work in the South, I feel like was just so different. It wasn't like people lined—we weren't able to turn people away from meetings, I remember being on national calls and [others] being like, We had to turn people away from reproductive rights policy meeting. It was so hard. And I was like, "Who are you?"

That is another thing I feel grateful for doing work in the South, not only the political climate in terms of being very overtly anti-choice and not even anti-choice, just like overtly like, Abortion is murder, and you're a murderer. Ha! But also there are just so few resources. Even still, living in the Bay now, I hear people complaining about resources, and I'm just like, You have no idea. It's so much more than we ever had. The lack of resources combined, I think, in the South—at least during my time in the South—with the amazing resiliency and people who were doing fucking phenomenal work and thinking about things in ways that I still feel inspired by now, you know? And I think that out of the lack came such a fierce, and such a sharp analysis, too, that felt really grounded, so yes. I'm going all over the place.

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KWON: I'm really interested in your work in the South, especially around—well, I've never lived in the South. I lived in Texas for a little bit, which is kind of like the South but—

48:52

MINGUS: The middle part.

KWON: But yeah they think their own country,

MINGUS: I know! Totally.

KWON: So they told me, Oh, we're not the South.

MINGUS: Or some of them think they're like the West, it's fascinating. Well, it's so huge, too, you know.

KWON: Yeah, that's true. I was in Austin, so that's a little more progressive than the rest. But I don't think I really encountered a black/white racial paradigm or that dichotomy. I don't know how it's in Georgia though. I was just wondering how you navigated that especially as an Asian American person or at least someone who's perceived to be not part of that dichotomy.

MINGUS: Totally. No, it's really intense and very real. I think like, Texas, yeah, there's a lot more Latinos as well and Mexican folks. Yeah, so it's very different. But definitely the black/white racial paradigm exists, and I think a lot of groups have been doing work to shift that and I know that there's like a very vibrant immigrant justice movement as well, but people trying to build those bridges, it's very hard, it's very hard. And at the same time, I think there was something familiar about it to me, too, because it's what I grew up in. So it was just like, there was something not—it wasn't like a new thing. It was like, "Right. This exists, and life goes on." So I think in my own experience, too, that was like—being out here now on the West Coast and seeing the type of access people have to not even just API [Asian/Pacific Islander] community, but to a racial paradigm that includes Asian people in it or that includes many different types of people of color. Like when people say people of color out here, they actually mean people of color out here, you know? Not just Black people? And I remember coming to the West Coast and being like, "Whoa."

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And at the same time though, I think what I appreciate about the South and the Caribbean and what I feel like I got from them, those places, is that they have a really sharp analysis of anti-Black racism that I feel like the West Coast—I don't find it out here. I think in some ways, it becomes too nuanced, their framework. I wish I could combine the two, because I think that there's a much better analysis out here around, for example, language and culture and ethnicity, where it's not just about phenotypes and racial markers, where it's also like, Oh right, whether it's around language or the culture that you grew up in, all of those things, the culture that you practice in your house, whereas I think in the South, because of geographically of where you're located and because of the land that you're on and the history of slavery and the history of plantations, and all of those things, I think there's just a different root and a different ground that that racial paradigm comes out of that, you know, Yes, it's very hard and even going back to Atlanta, I'm like, "Right." Here it's nice to be anonymous and—I don't think I even realized how fucked up it was that I was harassed every day, because I was Asian and probably also because I was an Asian woman, but you know, here it's—I feel like I can be anonymous, and people don't—and not that people don't do it, people certainly have and they do. It's not like there is no racism out here either, which is totally untrue. But it's just very different when there are so many other people who look like you, and I think in Atlanta and growing up in St. Croix, there was something about like—I always talk about [how] a lot of my

identity has felt like there's a spectacle piece of it, that I've always been the only X or sometimes the only X, Y, Z. And I think I was really used to that, and part of the reason why I moved out to the West Coast was I was really longing for something other than that. Going back to Korea for the first time was really wonderful, because you got to see people who look like you, you know?

KWON: It's something you don't know exists until you go there.

MINGUS: Exactly. I mean granted, there's pros and cons there too, because there's totally a beauty myth that's created there, and all these fucked up things too. Everybody's able bodied, supposedly, there's different things like that, but just hands down seeing people who look like you, it's just so important and—or it was to me. I think it's important across the board, but I mean, you know, people need to do what they need to do to survive. Like if you're not ready for it, I can totally understand that. So it's not like a judgment but I think for myself, that was something that was always hard, but it was like I didn't—I think that I didn't even think that life could be any other way, you know what I mean? And it was just kind of like, Well that's just the way that is, and you learn how to exist in that, which Andy Smith always talks about our revolutionary imaginations, and I think that was definitely—yeah.

53:08

KWON: Could you tell me a little bit more about your role as the leader of SPARK? And also maybe why you came up with the name since you were the founder of it?

54:06

MINGUS: Yeah, so I was the co-founder and co-leader. I want to be really mindful of that, that Paris was totally like co-pilot at the time. A little bit more about my role. So the thing that I think is really fascinating—not fascinating—but the thing I think is really important that I talk about sometimes when I travel is white privilege gets so ambiguously defined and White people, it's just like, I just don't—Is it just me smiling at you? What is it? I don't know what that looks like? What do you mean when you say give up power?

And I think when I think about my life, so much of it was about people leveraging their white privilege for me and giving up power. So I think about Erin really investing in my leadership, and when she wanted to have me go for the fellowship, I remember her really taking me under her wing and being like—I mean I don't know. She didn't say it explicitly, but really being like, I want you to be a leader in Georgians for Choice. And I kind of had this idea that she wanted me to be her predecessor or something or just—she wanted me to be a leader and to have support and to—you know, like introducing me to people when we went to places, and talking about me. So I wasn't like just sitting next to her, just flanking her silently. And so I think about that and about her leveraging her white

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privilege and giving up a lot of her power. She could've just had me be quiet in meetings. She didn't have to introduce me to anybody. She could've just had me work for her and that's it. And she really didn't want that, and she was like, *You* go to this national meeting, and *you* be our representative. And I was scared shitless, but—at the time, I didn't want to do it, but now I look back, and I'm like, "Right, that's really important."

And then I think of people who unintentionally did it, and the kinds of privileges I got as an adoptee—even though there was other fucked up things that happened—just having access to white privilege in the way that I did, in terms of [how] my parents made sure that I went and got an education, I learned how to speak English, I learned about white middle-class culture that is—all of those things feel like things that I never would have learned necessarily. I mean, and then there were other things that were not as fun, definitely, and that were really oppressive but again, having to hold oppression and privilege at the same time, because it's not either or. It's much more complicated than that.

And then I think about becoming a co-director at Georgians for Choice at the time, and that was explicitly because our board president, who was a White woman, was like, I'm going to use my power as the president of the board and make this happen. The board was not supportive of it at the time. And so I think about things like that where people have concretely used their privilege as white people—whether it's explicitly white privilege or not—for the service of people of color leadership. I know that I would not have had access to those types of opportunities or resources or experiences as a woman of color, as an Asian woman, particularly as an Asian woman in the South, and as a disabled person, as an Asian queer disabled person, like I know I would not have had access to those things if it wasn't for those times when white privilege got leveraged for my benefit, and so when I think about being a leader at Georgians for Choice and being able to transition into SPARK, I think about those instances and how important they are, and that was I think what—

I mean, I feel like a lot of those instances, I don't know the other stories in other organizations, but I would guess that there are a lot more stories like that of how women of color even got to be in leadership positions. I mean a lot of women of color—we had to fight for it, most definitely. We had to bring her around. She wasn't on board in the beginning. But then she finally made the decision—there was a lot of shit that happened before that, most definitely, but—so I don't want to lose those [points]. It wasn't like she was like, Yes! I'm going to do this and be a benevolent white person, you know? It was not like that at all. You definitely have to fight for it, but so—

We knew we wanted to bring Georgians for Choice into a reproductive justice framework. We knew that the majority of our community and our base of people that we were working with at that time anyways were queer people, queer and trans* people of color. And we

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knew that that [RJ work] was a gap that wasn't being filled in Atlanta, and that SisterSong, even though they were a national organization, they weren't doing a lot of local work. I'm less familiar with what they're doing now. But they were really working—and so much of their great work that they were able to do was forwarding this reproductive justice analysis, which was wonderful, and there was a gap in terms of local organizing that we thought we could fill. And we also, I think, had our finger on the pulse of the larger movement in general as like, reproductive justice was where people are going anyways, and it's where we want to be, in terms of being in the South. And I mean, at the time, there wasn't really a place for even just straight women of color to go for organizing other than the big national white organizations that had branches there, so I guess that's some of the leadership stuff. I'm not exactly sure—and then what was the second question you asked me?

KWON: The name?

1:00:36

MINGUS: Oh, right. That was like pulling teeth and herding cats. We went through all kinds of names. We had a great board at the time and a great little cluster of people who were helping us—board members and volunteers and interns. I don't know how we settled on SPARK. It wasn't an acronym; everybody thinks it's an acronym. It was not an acronym. We wanted something that was shorter, that wasn't going to be a thousand letters of acronymy or whatever, and we wanted something that was reflective of us as younger people doing this work. I was an executive director at 26, so I was still fairly young. And then the Left just loves colons, so we were like, SPARK: Reproductive Justice NOW. And I don't even remember. I feel like I've just blocked that whole part out of my memory, because it was such a long process. I know more about the logo than anything else, because that was a joy. Well, not a joy, but it was a little bit easier to do.

But I remember we were like up at my—Elizabeth Anderson was a friend of mine in Atlanta. She now is the executive director at Charis Circle, around Charis books. She let us—her family member had a cabin, so we were up in the cabin in the Georgia mountains. We had a facilitator and stuff, and yeah. I remember somebody said SPARK, and we were just like, We love that. And then we thought we had to add “Reproductive Justice NOW,” because otherwise people wouldn't know what we did.

KWON: You were also talking about your relationship with national organizations. How did that actually work? I know there's always a lot of challenges and tension around national organizations speaking on behalf of local, grounded community organizations, but not actually being in touch with them.

1:02:23

MINGUS: Totally. I mean, that was how it worked. (laughs) No. I mean, we were a local organization, and we were statewide, so it wasn't even like we were regional or anything. We were not a chapter of any organization, and we were in a region where there weren't a lot of reproductive justice work. There wasn't a lot of reproductive justice work at the time—or certainly not people calling themselves reproductive justice. Obviously, people have been doing reproductive justice work forever, so it's not like it's anything—whatever you call it, but in terms of visibility, we didn't really know enough at that time. So I just remember being on conference calls sometimes and—in my head—just being like, “I cannot relate to any[thing]. I don't even know why I'm on this call. Like why am I here?” Because the suggestions and things to do and the messaging, we were like, I don't think that's going to work here. Yeah, and—oh, I think my partner's here.

KWON: Oh, ok.

MINGUS: Do you want to go into the—she's fine to go somewhere else and listen, but I don't want to—she'll come in. Is that going to be okay?

KWON: Oh, it's fine, it's fine.

MINGUS: But you know, we had a lot of national organizations that were—not stealing, but there were people who were kind of taking a lot of work that we had done, and “liberally borrowing” it without actually having done their own work. And particularly, we were—I don't even know. Were there many other young queer women of color leaders at that time? I don't even remember.

1:03:54

KWON: I doubt it.

MINGUS: I don't think so. So I just remember just really not being impressed by the national scene, and at the same—no, that's not true, that's not true. Just mainly the White leaders. At the same time, there were national folks that I really was blessed to know. We were really lucky to be part of that national circle, because we got a lot of love there from people who were like, Y'all are doing great work. But then it was also this hard thing, too, of traveling so much that you don't actually have time to do the work where in where you're supposed to be doing it.

KWON: What national coalitions were you involved in?

1:04:56

MINGUS: I was a part of Causes in Common, which was trying to LGBT work with reproductive rights, health, and justice work that was happening. And then there was the ACCESS—Was it called the Access Project? No. **Susan Eno** was a part of that. It was another kind of—the Access something—

“access” was in the title, something. And that wasn’t like explicitly reproductive justice or anything, and **NILNY** of course. We would go to the CLPP [Civil Liberties and Public Policy] conference. I feel like there was one more that we were a part of that—I cannot remember now. But we went to a lot of conferences, and that was one thing. I mean, the RJ folks, they were really good about bringing people together. We didn’t always know what was happening. Yeah, but I think, too, at that time, I was really starting to speak out a lot more about disability and so a lot of people really wanted to know about that and the connections.

KWON: Did you want to also highlight some successes that you think you had as an organization?

(Partner walks in)

MINGUS: Sure. (To partner) Hi.

KWON: Hi.

MINGUS: This is Juhee. She’s interviewing me. No, no you’re fine. You’re fine.

Successes that the organization had. Yeah (laughs). I mean, the fact that we were able to transition and create SPARK, I think was huge, and that it’s still going, and that now it’s doing like media camps and stuff like that, which is amazing. I know the work has evolved, which I’m so—I’m so happy! I love when work evolves and founders leave, and there’s no founder-itis. That makes me happy. So that was a huge thing, and that took a lot of work. Getting it off the ground, and getting visibility of us—not just making it happen, but then making sure that other people knew about us and things like that. Our programs, I think, are places of—you know, it’s hard to say *big* successes, because it’s still a relatively new organization, in terms of arc of justice and the arc of organizing.

1:06:23

Even like legisla—(inaudible) and being able to build out and trying to forward a reproductive justice messaging around policy work—particularly in Georgia. Because Georgia was—and it still is, I think—one of the—I forget what they call it. There’s a name that they call it, but it’s one of the states that they use to send the pieces of legislation they think are going to be most controversial. They’ll send it through Georgia, because they know it’ll pass and to help them set a precedent before they roll it out everywhere else. So lucky. So that we were able to do that was really good.

And then I look at the partnerships that we were able to build, and I was really a part of that work. I was a part of the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative [ATJC], and that was a huge partnership between, at

1:08:03

the time, SPARK and CWPE and then Project South. What I think is a huge success was we were able to do joint fundraising, which I think—I still think those are huge successes if people are able to do it. One of my passions is around fundraising, because I think we don't talk enough about money. We don't talk enough about sharing of resources and redistribution and what that means, and money tends to be a place where even in our most radical political spaces, people get very conservative around it. But we were able to do two joint fundraisers, Sex, Wine and, Chocolate, which was something we came up with at Georgians for Choice, and we continued it. And the first one was around the ATJC, and it was, SPARK and the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative [ATJC]. The second year, I really feel like we got a little bit more steam behind it, and we had done it a first year so we had a little bit more practice. We partnered with Project South, and that was, I think, one of the really good [examples of] what I see when I think of cutting edge work, in terms of—just the structure of it. Really using it as a chance to educate our base around what Project South does. Project South, educating their base around what SPARK does, and in terms of movement building, fundraising together—not just educating what people do, but really cultivating a shared community and cultivating an awareness that we need each other, that one organization is not a movement, one organization is not going to create liberation, that we need all these different folks and that we have each other's backs and that we want to support each other. We collaborated to do the fundraiser, and then we split the profits from it, and I think that whole process of building of relationships to do that, the combining of resources, the trust that it builds, as well as the event itself, and really bringing our communities together that were—sometimes [the communities] overlapped and sometimes they were very different—and that that was—I don't see enough of that, and to me when I think back on successes, that's one thing that I really remember. I don't know if it's still continuing or not, but yeah.

And then another big success that we had was we were—Because we had come out of a coalition structure, we were really good at connecting different issues around reproductive health, rights, and justice. When I first came on, we had 25 members in our coalition, and they were different organizations. They were everybody from like Raksha, who did work around domestic violence in the South Asian community to traditional abortion clinic provider folks to people who were doing work in the gay men's community to people who were doing work around youth work, you know. [The fact that] all of those people, one, were part of the coalition and then that they saw the connection between their work and reproductive rights or reproductive justice, I thought, was huge. I think that that helped to cultivate the conditions that really allowed us to move towards SPARK, because if we had been a traditional pro-choice organization, I think it would've been much harder. I mean, it was hard anyways, but yeah.

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KWON: I'm also interested in knowing if you actually considered your work to be a part of the Asian American Reproductive Justice movement—or how you framed the work that you did as Asian American woman but doing reproductive justice in the South.

1:11:47

MINGUS: I mean, we weren't working with a lot of Asian communities. Certainly, there were some, but across the board, it was not the same as NAPAWF or ACRJ at the time. So I wasn't framing my work in that framework, and I really saw my leadership more as "in support of" and "to help be in service of" the communities that we were serving, which was predominately queer people of color who were African American. I guess we had some non-black people of color, but it was mostly Black and White folks.

But I felt connected though, at the same time, as an Asian American woman leader to those people [in the Asian American Reproductive Justice movement] most definitely and connecting with them. It's less so the West Coast, actually. I felt more connected with like Miriam [Yeung] and Sujatha [Jesudason] later on, definitely, because as they were doing Generations Ahead, I was invited to a lot of their stuff around disability. They were some of the only reproductive justice people that I knew of who were really tackling that. And then like I said before, there was just so many different pieces. I really felt like, more so than the Asian American piece, I was really holding the queer and trans* piece, the disability piece, and the Southern piece. Those three pieces felt like—and in a lot of ways, the young leadership piece. Those four pieces felt like the big pieces that I was holding, but really what it became was disability. I mean that became the main thing, because there was just such a gap. Because there was just nothing, and there were other people, even though it was small, pushing for queer and trans* work around reproductive justice, and then pushing for queer and trans* people of color. There were small groups of people, building power around being API women and what that meant in reproductive justice, and being queer API and what that meant. That was happening. But across the board, we just didn't see anything on disability justice, and so I ended up speaking, I think, a couple of times about adoption in reproductive justice, but that was much less.

KWON: Can you tell me a little bit more about the intersection between disability justice and RJ work?

1:14:26

MINGUS: Yeah, yeah. So there's the intersection of the content, of course. I began just asking questions, and that's how it all started. They would give statistics around forced sterilization or around abortion or around sexual violence of women of color, or you know, all these different groups, and I would always ask, "Well, what about disabled women?" or "What about disabled people?" And they never had any statistics. So there's the content

piece, I feel like, in terms of that there *are* disabled people who can get pregnant or there *are* disabled people who have reproductive needs or who need reproductive health. That is one thing.

And then I think there is larger, bigger connections—similar with queerness—around right to parent issues, particularly, and how disabled people across the board are discouraged from being parents or our the long history of eugenics and how eugenics has been so tied with disability. Eugenics and ableism sometimes mean the same thing; you can't tell them apart. The forced sterilization of not just women of color but of disabled people—not just disabled women but disabled men as well—and how disabled people have been desexualized and the thought that they're not even sexual beings. One, that we don't desire sex. Two, that nobody would desire us anyways, so we're not having sex. The connections around access to health care and being able to physically get into a clinic, being able to have the equipment so that you can get a pap smear if you're someone who's in a power wheelchair. So it's not just about state-issued IDs, it's not just about class. I mean those things, of course, could be pertinent to a disabled person, because disabled people are *not* just disabled. But specific work around disability and access, I feel, was a huge other piece, and there was so much around health and the medical industrial complex that were such deep ties, around the experience that disabled people have had with the medical industrial complex and with health care. [There is] the deep need to remember that it's not just about fighting for the right to receive care but also the right to refuse care, and the deep and long history that disabled people have had—alongside women of color—with being mistreated and being experimented on and not given rights when it comes to medical care, and not just not having access to it but then needing protection from it, and not seeing healthcare or access to health care as something that's necessarily going to liberate them.

I feel like there's just so many connections like that. I mean how can you talk about bodies without talking about disability? How can you even begin to have a conversation about who's bodies are desirable or undesirable without also including disabled people on it. When you think about the deep connections between women of color and peoples with disabilities, so many women of color are disabled—whether it's from trauma, whether it's from depression, or whether they're physically disabled, whether they've been forcibly institutionalized around their mental health and what have you—*because* they're women of color or *because* they're disabled women or both, like all of those things, and the ways people of color's bodies across the board are seen as less than, and so much of that has to do with the abilities or the capabilities that they're thought to have or not have, right? Or the special abilities that they're thought to have or not have.

So all of those pieces felt like they were really important to start pulling out. The long rub and conflicts around disabled feminism, and

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what it means to fight for access to abortion rights and know that abortion is used to deselect disabled fetuses all the time. How do we hold people's right to parent around sperm and egg banks and things like that and in vitro, while also knowing that those places are huge places of eugenics and where like "healthy" people are okay to donate their sperm and eggs and that those are also places where disability gets deselected? So all of those things—and I feel like I could just go on and on and on—were places where I was really feeling were not being talked about, and I thought they needed to be talked about more. And I thought, too, I don't understand how we can keep moving towards reproductive justice without more disabled people. It just doesn't make sense to me, given the amount—Similarly I don't think we can move towards reproductive justice without women of color, for example, given the amount of injustices and the amount of reproductive oppression and violence that is cast upon them and done to them. And then I also think that the amount of reproductive oppression and violence that is done against disabled people—I don't know how we can continue to move towards reproductive justice without us. I just don't think it's going to happen. And so those were a lot of the things that I would bring up. Sometimes it went well, and sometimes it did not go well.

KWON:

What's the current status of the intersections between disability rights and RJ work? Do you think it's advanced since you started talking about those issues?

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MINGUS:

I don't know. I think we've done a lot of good work building the analysis, but I don't know that I see a lot of actual work. I mean disability justice is still very new, too. Disability justice is—Disability rights work has done a little bit around reproductive choice. . . maybe? I don't even know if that's true. But I feel like disability justice actually has more of an opportunity given the intersectionality of its framework and who is forwarding it. At the same time, I feel like our movements are so inaccessible across the board, like our social justice movements are, that it's still so segregated, in terms of most disabilities—not all, because there's a lot of people—

The other thing that I found was not just how segregated things are, and the silence and the absence of people with disabilities, but also that there are a lot of us already there, who are doing the work. And that was something that I consistently said. I was like, "I am here doing the work, and I am a disabled woman, so we are also here." And I feel like whenever I would talk about disability on panels and things, people would always come up to me afterwards and whisper, I'm disabled, too. I just never talk about it. So there are disabled people there, doing the work, but for whatever reason, don't feel safe or don't feel comfortable coming out as disabled, or who had never thought of themselves as politically disabled because the stigma around it's so incredibly intense—like I was, living very disabled lives but not thinking of themselves as politically disabled.

Not incorporating disability into their political analysis of their work. Not connecting that, and I see that again and again and again. And a lot of that is because people are—not just stigma, there are just no spaces to talk about it. I mean where and how are people supposed to come into that? Even the literature that we have—We don't have a lot of books, we don't have a lot of writings. I mean we have more blog writings now, at least, but we still need so much more.

And then there's also like the redundancy, I think, of disabled people of color, because people already assume that people of color are less smart, less capable. And then there's also the history and the reality that so much people of color communities have disabilities in our lives all the time, and we just don't see it in a political sense, or we're just not making those connections. So many of our communities are living in poverty, don't have access to health care, and what happens to bodies when there are police brutality all the time? What happens to bodies who don't have access to medical care, or who are living the realities of generations of intimate violence and generations of state violence and living the realities the violence that the immigration system and of colonization and of war, and militarization? All of those things. I feel like disability in some ways is so—It's so second-nature to communities of color, and in another way, it's so completely foreign. It's like we need people who know how to do that dance, and how to do that respectfully, and in ways that are culturally competent, but that also doesn't fall into cultural relativism, you know what I mean? [We need people] that *are* disabled people of color. We also just don't have enough disabled people of color leadership in disability justice and all of that. There are so many risks to come out as a political disabled person of color, let alone as a queer person of color as well. All of those things, I feel like, are parts [that] contribute to where we're at and what the reality is around disability and reproductive justice.

But I do think that there is some headway being made. I feel like people are talking about access more than they ever have. People actually say ableism when they list out oppressions—which when I was coming up in reproductive justice, never happened. So that's what? Seven years? That's not bad. I mean, obviously I want it to be faster, but I know things move slowly. I saw Angela Davis speak like a year ago somewhere, and she said “disability,” and that was like amazing. You know, small things like that that feel exciting.

KWON: How are you able to take that framework of disability justice and apply it to your work? How is it relevant now to the work that you do here?

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MINGUS: So my work is in two broad pieces. My work *is* disability justice, so I apply it all the time there, and then I do transformative justice work. So in that work, I feel like—The transformative justice work that I do is around community responses to child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is very,

very pervasive, and just as the statistics that we're given say that people who are identified or assigned as girls are twice as likely to be victims of child sexual abuse, the same statistics are true around disabled children and adults, because there's also developmental stuff that gets complicated. But actually, in terms of gender, we actually think it's much more—we think it's much higher around people who get assigned as boys, too, but that there's less reporting. So it's hard to know. I feel like my TJ [transformative justice] around child sexual abuse, or CSA, work is disability justice work, because I know so many people who are survivors of child sexual abuse who are disabled people—myself included—and I know so many people who—I know that disabled communities don't talk it. No communities talk about child sexual abuse. So it's not just disabled communities, but given the prevalence, I think that it's something that disabled communities should be talking about and that most disabled children don't have access to community, don't have access—There's just so many more complications around disabled children, I feel like, that get added in around dependency and all that, so I feel like disability justice is certainly a huge piece of that work, too. And in that work, the people that I work with, I'm so fortunate to get to work with amazing people. Disability justice is a huge value and principle that we try to move forward in our work as well and try to stay aligned with.

KWON: What kind of programs do you actually do? Could you tell me a little bit more about the organization itself?

1:26:59

MINGUS: It's not an organization.

KWON: Oh, it's not?

MINGUS: It's a collective. So it's a group of community folks who—I mean, it sounds weird to say we're all volunteers because it's our life's work, so it's not like a volunteer thing, but none of us get paid currently. We have been meeting for two years. Our goal is to create transformative justice responses to child sexual abuse, so responses that don't rely on the State, so people are able to intervene in incidences or cases of child sexual abuse without having to call the police, without having to just send somebody to prison, a response that's not just about resisting violence but also about how do we cultivate and create the world that we want, meaning the things that actually will prevent violence from happening—like safety, healing, accountability, transformation, all those things. And so that's the work that we're doing. Our vision is a Bay Area where everybody has the skills and the capacity to be able to intervene or prevent an act of or an incident of child sexual abuse.

And so our work is a lot—It's very different. It's alternatives building work. It's not direct needs or immediate needs work, which tends to be a lot of responding, responding. Our work is—I feel like it's a lot

slower and deeper, and so we're working towards supporting our first trial intervention in three years, we'll be doing that. Until then, what we're doing is, currently right now, we are developing a possible accountability model for TJ intervention in CSA. We've been studying accountability models and processes that have already taken place—many of which are not around child sexual abuse, just given the unique risks involved—but seeing what's transferrable and what's not, in terms of interventions that have been successful or where there's pieces of it that have been successful. And so that's one. We'll be having our first draft of that on October 1, which is so exciting.

The other big piece is the provider network work that we're doing. So the framework that we're working in is—Given where we're at, and given where we want to be, obviously we want to be where it's like there's healers in every school, there's like accountability circles that are just community run that people do, and everybody knows how to run an accountability process, and you know, people don't even need to be held accountable. They take accountability, right? They do something, they're like, I want to take accountability for this, right? It's not like, You did something wrong. Ever. That's where we want to be, and we know that that's a very long way between where we are and where we want to be. So in the mean time, what is the work going to look like? Obviously, we would love to have just a pure TJ intervention that never relies on the State and is totally community based and funded, whatever, but we know that that's not—We haven't built to the scope and scale that would allow for that yet. We're still a relatively small group of people in terms of how large child sexual abuse is when we think of the statistics, which are one in four girls, and one in six boys. That's huge, right? That number. The other piece that we know is most children are abused by people that they know, that serial child sexual abusers are like less than 2%. Most people are sexually abused by people that they know or are in their intimate networks. So we have like the pervasiveness of CSA that we're like trying to work on and hopefully end it, not just respond to it, and we haven't built to the scope and scale that we want, so how do we leverage what's already here? How do we leverage what's already in place? So the provider network is going to be building a network of providers that we're able to leverage their services in support of interventions.

When we look at the landscape of child sexual abuse, we know that by far, the biggest the most significant gap is around offenders. If we think about survivors, bystanders and offenders, we know that the gap of services for offenders is huge. At least—even if they're not perfect—there's a lot more services for survivors, and there's actually some services, a lot more services for by standers, whether it's like educational groups, support groups, whatever. But when it comes to offenders, it's pretty much like you either get locked up and put in jail, there's a lot of pathologizing and therapeutic stuff, and then there's some smaller more innovative things, but that's the biggest gap, so we know that we want to

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work there, and then in the meantime, how do we leverage what's already existing? For survivors, how do we sort through those services and find which ones are good? Which are the best support groups? Or which of the support groups are trans* friendly? Which of the support groups are not going to tell on you or report you if you're undocumented? Which of the support groups are held in accessible spaces, right? All of those things. Who is a gynecologist that we could recommend you to or refer you to that you could actually come out as a CSA survivor and they wouldn't be an asshole to you, or that they would know and be competent around some of the impacts that that might mean for not just your medical health but your emotional health as well and have a good bedside manner around that. So in the provider network, it's people who are either aligned with transformative justice, people who are movable, like if there's just one person in the organization, for example, or somebody who's like, Yes, I know, because I'm seeing firsthand how the system doesn't work, I don't—I know we need something different, but I just don't have enough education, or people who are just the bests in their fields. So we're having our first gathering of that at the end of this week actually, which is super exciting.

The other thing that we're doing in that provider network is that we're we just had our first draft of the system maps, which are visual maps for people to be able to see what the different pathways are if you decide to engage the State, or if somebody else—like if your neighbor calls CPS [Child Protective Services] on you. So that you can literally see, Okay, if CPS comes and gets involved, here is what the process looks like. Here is the number of times you'll have to show up in court. Here are the decision makers at each step. Here's what you need to know in terms of if somebody calls 911 vs. CPS. All of that. So that feels really exciting, too, to use as like a tool to educate people but also, again, like knowing that one of the defining characteristics of living with oppression is that you have to make really hard choices, and the choices you have are not choices—I mean you already know the critique of the pro-choice movement—and they're not always just. So we're trying to also figure out how do we work with what we have, knowing that for some people because we haven't built to the scope and scale yet that—We want to be able to hold survivor healing and maybe even accountability, to be able to hold bystander education and maybe accountability and healing here, too, to be able to hold offender transformation, accountability, all of that. We can't hold all of that yet, and we want to get to a place where we can, obviously, so what does it look like in the meantime? So that's the scope of our work right now, which feels exciting.

KWON: It's huge. That's a really big vision.

1:35:12

MINGUS: Yeah, yeah, but we also think this is—and I remember coming to this realization when I was doing reproductive justice work in Atlanta—that a

lot of people were not going to the clinic, not because they didn't have a state issued ID, or because they didn't have anybody to watch their kid in the middle of the day, or because they were scared that [the providers] were going to be queerphobic or transphobic. A lot of people weren't going to seek reproductive health, because they had survived sexual violence and they were like, I just don't deal with anything around any of that. I feel like I really—and so many of the people that I talked to and ended up working with had been survivors of child sexual abuse as well, and that that was just something that was a huge barrier around not only them seeking reproductive health services but also in their ability to be able to be involved in a lot of work. A lot of people were still carrying huge amounts of trauma and still had a lot of healing that they didn't [do], because they didn't have access to healing services or anything like that. Coming into the work, I started with the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative, and we partnered with Generation Five, really coming into the work around a clear strategic vision around like—Given how prevalent child sexual abuse is and given how devastating the impacts are in our community—If it really is one in four girls and one in six boys, and those are just estimates, they say. They actually estimate that it's much higher than that, given that most people don't even report child sexual abuse. So if we know that it's probably higher than one in four girls and one in six boys, given the prevalence, given the lasting impacts that it's just had on one person, and then multiplying that by everyone, it's not just about impacts on relationships, which directly impact your community, because in my mind, our communities are going to be what holds our revolutions. There is no good organizer in my mind that's also not doing community building, because they're so connected. Community is like the foundation that organizing gets built upon. A lot of that's misogyny and all that patriarchal mess that doesn't get—community building doesn't get recognized as real work but whatever. But given that, the child sexual abuse then becomes a strategic place to do work on, that then becomes a strategic generational place to do work on, because you can literally see how not just child sexual abuse, but intimate violence as well, but particularly child sexual abuse is passed down generation to generation. So strategically going for that hitting that mark, trying to intervene the cycle around child sexual abuse, which is often times the first place where people are being taught or learning about power and control, learning about oppression. We talk about it as the building blocks of oppression, and the building blocks of what normalizes violence later on, normalizes reproductive violence, [and] normalizes all kinds of other forms of violence. That is the first place where people are learning that consent doesn't exist and that their voice does not matter, and [where people are] learning shame about their bodies—all of these themes that reproductive justice really heavily hits on and should hit on in my opinion. Child sexual abuse is also a strategic place for organizing and for all of our movements, because it's not just about this secret thing that gets hidden that happens in

people's home. The state uses child sexual abuse, whether it's rape as a weapon of war—we know a lot of those rapes happen to children and young women who are not full-grown women yet, and to boys and to people who are not boys or women, who are intersex whatever. We know that the sex work and the sex trafficking that happens around the militarization, and we know the long history of Native American boarding schools and child sexual abuse being used as a tool for colonization, like all of these things. The State obviously doesn't have—if it's using child sexual abuse, it doesn't have a vested interest in ending it.

So I feel like my CSA work actually is a lot about reproductive justice and I bring a lot of my reproductive justice work with me, because I just think they're just so deeply tied, and there's no way—it's impossible to separate intimate violence, and particularly sexual violence, from reproductive justice anyways. But yeah, that's the work that I do now and I feel like that's where my heart really is, because I haven't come across a community where child sexual abuse doesn't exist, and certainly within Asian women communities, people don't talk about child sexual abuse. And yet I meet so many Asian women survivors of CSA all the time, who come up to me after I've spoken somewhere or after they read about my work. They don't have anywhere to go. There's no services. Because even those larger services that we were talking about, in that survivor realm, I mean a lot of women of color don't even access those services because of the silence and the added targeting that you're putting your community at risk and your self at risk for, if you come out as a survivor. There's so many pieces to why I feel really passionate around my CSA work, and then the transformative justice piece of it, I feel is just exactly right on the money, because so many of our folks don't report it and don't seek services because they are scared of what the state will do. They are scared of deportation, they are scared of people being harassed and beaten again or locked up and taken to prison, or because they can't call the cops cause the last time the cops came to their house, they ended up raping them. There's so many things, so it feels like a really natural progression in my mind. I hope that it makes sense in other people's minds.

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KWON:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, it totally does. When I first heard about transformative justice, I thought it was a jump [from RJ work], and I was like, "I'm not really sure [what it is]. I want to ask her more about it," and how you got to that point. But I think a lot of your analysis, how it comes together is really incredible. It's interesting. It's really great.

1:41:31

MINGUS:

I mean at the crux of transformative justice, what we're saying is responses to violence that don't create more harm or violence. If we know and understand the state as being places where more violence is created, and the medical system being a place where more violence is created, then it becomes a question of what is protection even mean for our communities? What does safety even mean for our communities when

unarmed teenage black boys are being shot in their own neighborhoods, and there's no justice. Not that I wanted George Zimmerman to rot in prison either, because I don't believe in prisons, but you know—and I hold those complexities and contradictions together.

KWON: Oh my gosh. There's just so much passion in the things that you say, that I'm just like, "Oh, wow." I'm really into it, so I don't come up with any other questions afterwards, and I'm blank. (laughs)

Well, I think you did a really good job of covering everything I wanted to cover, so if you have anything else that you wanted to add in terms of what you wanted to document?

MINGUS: I mean, I guess I just wanted—because I know you said in the beginning that you—I guess I just want to make sure you get a sense of what disability justice is and what transformative justice is. No, i don't have anything from me, unless you do and i don't mind if you want to take a moment or something—

KWON: Oh, no. I'm good.

MINGUS: because I'm not usually in Boston, so. Is that where Brown is? No. Connecticut?

KWON: No, I'm in Providence.

MINGUS: Providence. Rhode Island! Right, right.

KWON: Yes, Rhode Island.

MINGUS: OK. Damn. That's cold.

KWON: No, I'm good but I learned a lot. I really did, I really did. Well, thank you so much for the interview.

MINGUS: Thank you.

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I'll send you a copy of it by email after I transcribe it, which is going to take awhile.

MINGUS: Oh, God. I can see everything I said.

END OF INTERVIEW

