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RRASC Internship—Final Report  
Summer 2008  

Well, well, well...hasn't this been the ride of the summer. Possibly even my highlight of Hampshire, cementing who I am as a black queer woman (yes, it's that deep). Hell, I don't even know where to start. I'll start by saying, for the readers, that yes, SisterSong IS the best organization I could've been placed in for the summer. Their emphasis on building relationships with other organizations across the US, as well as internally, amongst the staff, myself and the other interns, was the greatest support network I could've gained. We had lunch at a ton of Atlanta's amazing restaurants, dinners at the staff's houses, and self-help sessions to make sure we were all doing fine. Any concern I had, we talked it over, laughed it over, cried it over, even. And I wouldn't trade those relationships I've made for anything.

THE PREP.  
Can't lie, I felt pret-ty uninformed on what Reproductive Justice was before I did the internship—I had it inside me all along, without even knowing that the passion and rage I felt was completely RJ. I wrote a paper for a class once on Single Mothers in the Black Community, redeeming them from the shame-and-blame that the government and media places on them, stating they ARE the reason for poverty, crime, the criminals themselves, and destitute neighborhoods. What I had more of, though, was the experience itself. Being raised by a single mother with some input from a father, I knew all too well that these stereotypes amounted to nothing, especially if the discourse wasn't surrounding the impact of absentee fathers too, forcing the woman to become two parents without her consent. My single mother gave me the tools to know I needed to become more than what the people who wrote those reports expected of me, and here I am today because of that. I hadn't thought much about the discourse of abortion, but I knew that I was both pro-choice, yet repulsed by abortion...however, I learned it is not the act of abortion so much as the ends justifying the act that matter more. And overall, the right of a woman to control her own body IS what matters most.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE WHO???  
On the first day, I was introduced to SisterSong staff member Luretha, a beautiful elder who ensured I would be in a comfortable, lively, and positive environment each day. Sometimes I didn't even want to get back to work, sitting in her office sharing conversations about the state of things. She gave me a project I previously had no idea I'd be working on, which was to help her debrief this phone book stack of articles pertaining to Environmental Justice/Reproductive Justice. These would aid her in preparing for the convening SisterSong would have on August 1-2, where representatives from both fields would come together as a think tank of sorts, understanding the similarities and
differences in their struggles. New to both of these terms, I shuttered, gasped, but took the readings and found myself lost within them instantly.

Again, I’d only been introduced to ‘environmental’ anything through Hampshire mostly, with kids parading posters/pamphlets/zines about eating organically and locally, clean water, sustainability, saving mountains…none of which interested me enough to join them in the fight, because to me they had no concrete details about the people who were impacted. I knew it had to be bigger than just a lake. I knew it had to be people drinking from that lake in the inner city who paid some astronomical water bill for a problem they didn’t create. And when I began to connect these environmental injustices to the people in low income communities and communities of color, who were most vulnerable to issues such as toxins, power plant locations, disabilities and diseases (shockingly, tainted breastmilk for pregnant mothers), children growing up with asthma from unhealthy air conditions, and most haunting of all, climate change, that's when my interest in environmental justice (not the environmental movement, there’s a difference), was sparked fully. The climate change readings showed me that another Katrina, sadly, is inevitable, if we do not begin to act now for and by communities of color for the good of our cities, our livelihoods, and our sustainability.

The readings were highly informative, and after about three weeks I thought they’d never end, which made it difficult for me to concentrate equally on my other project, the Community Mapping project (more about that later). But what’s funny is by the time the Convening took place in August, I was the designated note-taker, typing faster than my brain could think about all the wonderfully packed knowledge and action of all these organizers. It was more than inspiring to be in a room full of women of color (and one black male) dedicated solely to the causes of the places they live in. There were black and Latina women from every coast and the Midwest, Asian women from the West Coast, and Native American women from the Southwest. They were scholars, scientists, healers, and grassroots organizers. What teed me off a little was realizing that no one had read ANY of the prescribed readings either, but I didn’t sweat it. I felt that was knowledge I needed to be familiar with anyway.

I should have known that this was an amazing opportunity for the women to share their similarities in their respective struggles, but the differences began to ring louder in the first few hours, namely in definitions of what ‘environment’ even is. A Native American woman growing up in the Southwest on a reservation, who uses and respects the environment—land, air, water—for all it’s worth, would not see environment the same as a black woman growing up in hustle-and-bustle Detroit, having to rely on public transportation to get her to work, paying for water, gas, and electric every month. Nevertheless, the women placed up on flip charts the key causes their movements were dedicated to, and as the convening continued, they began to see more overlapping than anything. One major example was their movements’ vocabulary and work being co-opted
by mainstream white environmentalist and reproductive rights movements, but their voices and concerns still considered as ‘other’. In two short (yet excruciatingly long for my fingers) days, these women had to create next steps to keep the two movements together—and ways to minimize the overshadowing of the differences so that ‘power in numbers’ would be more than just a phrase. I, along with the other SisterSong intern Rhiannon, felt so young in that room, but I kept in mind that now I was building the foundation so that I can be where these women are later.

COMMUNITY MAPPING PROJECT

When I discovered the details of this project, I can't say I was the most excited. I appreciated Heidi for giving us the push to help each other out on our respective internships, as a key part of SisterSong was to give support to the other women for whatever they might have needed. But, I looked around at my other intern peers, who had projects with ‘cool’ titles. Like Rhiannon, working on putting together a focus group and resource guide for women transitioning from welfare to work; and Megan (who left two weeks into my internship), working on an Emergency Contraception campaign, surveying nearby pharmacies in the Atlanta area on their treatment of giving EC to teenage women who need it (we played the roles a few times, it was quite the experience). And me? Community Mapping? God, how broad. How brain-wrecking. How borrrrrinnnnng.

When Heidi, my ever-fabulous supervisor (I hate even calling her ‘supervisor’ here because it's so technical, and makes her sound ancient, and she’s neither of those) described the project to me as the beginnings of broadening SisterSong’s local foundation, researching various organizations in Atlanta that service women of color in some way, I still gulped…wait, there’s probably like tens of thousands of those! Where do I begin? Who do I ask? What area of social justice should I focus on? Should I ONLY focus on social justice organizations? AAAAAHHHH!! She later gave me a copy of a community mapping project she did for a past organization, to help me make sense of where to begin. In the back was a table that categorized each organization by type, such as ‘advocacy-legislative’, ‘churches’, ‘voting rights’, ‘elected officials’, and the like. A huge weight was lifted off of my chest when I realized this. But, it picked back up when she mentioned the concept of an ‘assessment tool’ for the organizations, which would include not only the categories themselves, but also abbreviations known as ‘assessment CODES’ (yeah, confused me, too), to give more insight to the work the organization does. For example, ‘youth-oriented’ organizations would have ‘YO’ next to them, LGBTQ organizations would have ‘LG’, and so on. My head again filled, wondering about the endless amount of assessment codes to be applied to each organization…I had trouble wrapping my head around this for weeks, sending Heidi any number of emails for her to give me clarity on the concept of ‘assessment code’, and how to even go about applying these to every organization.
But then, when I got knee-deep into the project, it all started to make sense. I researched by internet mostly, and realized that most of the organizations, despite being varied in social justice interests, did a lot of the same work, so organizations that were ‘youth oriented’ got grouped into that category, organizations that we all knew about got ‘mainstream appeal’ attached to them, organizations that were shelters, both violence against women and homeless, were simply placed in the ‘shelter’ category, arts as activism organizations fell there, and so on. What also made this a LOT easier was the use of the Human Rights framework, the eight categories (sexual, political, developmental, cultural, economic, environmental, civil, and social) that helped me to narrow them down even more. This also would light up ears of Loretta Ross, the founder of SisterSong, as the organization uses the Human Rights framework and applies it to the rights that any woman of color should have in this country. Once this was underway, it was only the research itself that felt like walking in mud for a period of time. My brain was constantly thinking about what assessment code should go to what group, what should be a category INSTEAD of an assessment code, what groups service women of color, and so on. Heidi was always there to give me help at every level I needed it, as we had weekly check-ins. She emailed me some organizations to keep my mind busy, too, which also helped.

Towards the end, when I put together the official report myself, I went in overdrive—it reminded me of typing a paper at the end of the semester, and I stopped at NOTHING until it was finished—intro, body, the goals of the project, and the table itself, which pissed me OFF because it wouldn’t cooperate. I finished this and met with Heidi and Loretta both to present the project, and sitting there I realized the benefits of doing this project at last. I was more than appreciative of finding out the myriad of social justice work that the city of Atlanta produces in such a short amount of time, which was one of many reasons that showed me that I’d LOVE to come back to the city and continue to network with these organizations. And after all of this, I was very elated that I aided SisterSong in their local relationship-building campaign, and hope that the RJ movement, in all of its branches, is stronger than ever when I return.

OPERATION SAVE AMERICA: IF THIS AIN’T A HIGHLIGHT, I DON’T KNOW WHAT IS!!!!

We were forewarned by Heidi about a month before that a highly oppressive, anti-choice, racist, sexist, anti-gay movement would make it’s 20th anniversary return to Atlanta in the middle of July. Their name: Operation Save America (OSA). The way Heidi painted them was as Jesusfreak lunatics, who’d stop traffic, knock door to door and inform neighbors that the doctor in their neighborhood was a babykiller, and implant billboard-sized fetus photos in the city to let others know of their cause. I was both infuriated and fearful of their arrival, knowing we at SisterSong had to act to make their stay as uncomfortable as possible. I also knew that I hadn’t engaged with anyone of their caliber in my entire life, although I vehemently disagreed with everything that they stood for.
You know how we get—we talk and act (and react) against the right wingers, but rarely get to interact with them...this would be quite the challenge for me, and force me to step outside of myself and get annngry. Not just angry on the page and in my poetry either, but annngry in person.

As the time approached, I was “ordered” by Heidi when she had the day off that I had to write an op-ed article for The Atlanta Voice newspaper, in response to some other Jesusfreak woman named Judie Brown. She wrote an article the week before for the paper addressing “The Pill Kills Day”, a day which celebrated the belief that birth control was not a contraceptive, but instead an abortive, and should be outlawed. I cringed here, knowing that for the first time I’d have to articulate my beliefs surrounding black women and abortion, and stuff them into 500 words or less (and as you probably can tell, I’m no brief speaker). Luckily, Heidi informed me that there was Loretta’s “Black Women and Abortion” article to assist me on the history of our struggle with abortion and birth control. This addressed the right to self-determination of our bodies, after so long of our bodies not being our own—raped and forced to reproduce in slavery, forced sterilization in the 20th century, and so on. Well, I whipped up something serrrious in a day’s time, and the office loved it! I emailed it to the editor, and it was printed right around the high time of OSA’s visit. The response from readers was also positive...to be honored by women who had been in the movement for decades was just phenomenal to me.

A week before their arrival, I was again “ordered” to go on the radio, 89.3 WRFG FM, to speak to the issue of black women and abortion. Since Heidi was out of town and Loretta had other obligations, I thought it shouldn’t be that much of a big deal...until I realized I was speaking on behalf of SisterSong as an organization. I’m like, eeeek, I’m just an intern...but I did it anyway. I was basically Superwoman on that day, doing 50/11 activities for Heidi in the office, fleeing to the radio station (by the MARTA train) after work, in the rain, lost in the sauce...and still had to make a “Sex, Wine and Chocolate” meeting at 6 for SPARK, the partner RJ organization working on OSA week. I got to the radio station just in time, only to realize that the original host was out for the day, and her replacement knew nothing about SisterSong. Luckily the radio station was not at all hostile to the issue of abortion, but hearing the woman (also named Loretta) tell me right before we went on air that “you’d be leading the discussion,” I felt my stomach drop. But, I strapped up, cleared my throat, and told the story of SisterSong to the best of my one-month knowledge.

After Loretta’s brief attempt to lead the discussion into talk of drug-addicted mothers, and whether or not they should be able to keep their children...I anxiously tried to turn it back into OSA coming to town next week, and the work that SisterSong and SPARK had planned for that week. Sweet Jesus, I couldn’t wait for that interview to end, but by the time I knew it, it was 5:30, and time to roll. I hastily jumped back onto the MARTA train downtown, trying to find the bus that ran past Project South (heyyy, another RRASC org!),
and crawled up in the bus and called Mia, co-ED at SPARK, to ask her if the meeting was over...lo and behold, it was. I went home, it was no use. My Superwoman day was over.

BUT the week these Jesusfreaks arrived in Atlanta made all of the pre-work SO worth it—we had something planned for each day of the week! A press conference at SisterSong on Monday morning; panel on black women and abortion on Wednesday, film festival on abortion Thursday, ushering them off Saturday with a band...that Saturday July15th that they swarmed into the city, we—me and 6 other SPARK ladies—met them at the very Best Western hotel they were staying in, equipped with a HUGE pink banner saying "WELCOME TO REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE SUMMER OSA!", various posters of "RIGHT TO LIFE EQUALS RIGHT TO HATE", "SAVE AMERICA FROM OPERATION SAVE AMERICA", "SEX IS THE STANDARD" and so on, and of course the proverbial megaphone. Before we knew it, there was one onlooker of theirs coming over to address us, named John, who we labeled the “token” Puerto Rican in their group...he was nice, diplomatic, and told us he’d been a virgin until 34...we laughed in his face, but respected his wishes.

Soon after, we pretty much smoked ‘em all out of the building, with them storming over to us, draped in their red “JESUS IS THE STANDARD” t-shirts, armed and dangerous with Bibles and dead fetus posters. They used the daunting tactic of body intimidation—there’s one person talking to you, but three more standing around you, saying nothing. I guess that was supposed to make us flip, and being that this was my first time ever engaging with these folks, I thought I’d be more nervous, but I strapped up and said “FUCK IT” and defended all that I am and will ever be...An old white guy named David Lackey latched himself onto me, interrogating me about why I was there, giving me the statistics on women who get abortions and why, stating the reasons they stake out at abortion clinics, the women whose minds they manage to change...all fluff, really, in the context of the week, as I quickly began to realize we’d NEVER see eye to eye.

They stationed out downtown in the HOT sun in Woodruff Park, planting their billboard sized posters of bloody, transparent, dead fetuses laying on white backgrounds, superimposed on top of dimes (yeh, it confused me too), and had the absolute NERVE to compare abortion to the Holocaust and the days of lynching blacks in America. When I saw that, I LITERALLY flipped. Oh—and worse, they racialized their entire campaign, since they were in Atlanta—they handed out pamphlets with a precious black girl on them, entitled “Where have all the BLACK children gone?” hoping to sway passers-by to their sick, twisted way of life, disguised under all the Jesus rhetoric.

For six days we engaged...and engaged...and engaged with these folks, wasting tons of valuable RJ breath. We stood across the street from them, draped in posters and warm water bottles. Two trans folks from Feminist Outlaws
stood on the side of the street with OSA, urging passers-by to “Join the Eric Rudolph Fan Club,” shining light on the dark, hateful, clinic-bombing history of such a Jesusfreak organization (they declared to us that they were not, nor were they ever, cooperating with those folks. We knew better than to believe this.).

I got the suntan of a summer being out there for those six days, holding a variety of posters, trying to knock some sense into their brainwashed spawn children that NOT everything your parents say is right, at some point you must think for yourself. And anytime we said to them the REASONS behind why women get abortions, we were met with “but it’s a BABY, a defenseless little BABY”. Funny enough, since this was also a sex-positive campaign, we asked these 13 and 15-year old girls if had they ever heard of masturbation. They cringed. “No…but if you guys are gonna start talking about this kinda stuff, we’re gonna have to cross the street.” I laughed HARD. I realized how sheltered these children were, even down to the language they used to address blacks—when the one girl said she’d “love to adopt a colored child,” I froze, startled, and soon burst into laughter mixed with disbelief. Of course, when she realized she was utterly ignorant, she replied, “oh, black, brown...oh, I don’t see color.” I’d had enough. This was day three.

Fortunately, we had more support from the passers-by than they ever did. More people were grossed out by them than anything, running over to us and thanking us for not being a part of them, and “for being the only people out here with some sense”. The honks, the hi-fives, the occasional folks that even helped us hold the posters, was all reassuring that we weren’t heathenish homosexuals on a highway to hell, but instead smart, determined, beautiful women who knew we owned our bodies, and were willing to stand up for our rights—even against the most antagonistic of people. We sang, we chanting—CHRISTIAN FASCISTS, KILLING DOCTORS, THAT’S THE WAAAAAY THEY GET TO HEAVEN, CHRISTIAN FASCISTS, KILLING DOCTORS, AND THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME...we were choir-like, even when one Jesusfreak lunatic was standing in front of us, armed with his Bible, screaming at us that “We had a choice to go to Hell,” he got louder and so did we. He knew his words had no merit. By Thursday I’d officially lost it though, and when he personally came to me and shouted that shit I pounded down on the newspaper boxes, “AND YOUR SOUL AIN’T EXEMPT??? UR FUCKIN SOUL AIN’T EXEMPT??? GET THE FUCK OUTTA HERE!!!!” and stormed across the street, slinging my water bottle and poster into the air, hoping it knocked his brains out. This skater kid later gave me a Newport, and reassured me everything would be all right.

Now I couldn’t make the finale, when SPARK hired a band to swoosh them out of Atlanta, out their hotel rooms and onto the planes, playing “When the Saints go Marching In,” but I guffawed with them in spirit. I knew that NONE of this work was in vain at all, and although OSA may have succeeded in locking arms at abortion clinics all that week, converting one abortion clinic worker to their side (we later found out they paid her to do so), their stay was not at all
pleasant, easy, or welcomed. They got no media coverage, with most of it going our way (Southern Voice, a GLBTQ newspaper, Atlanta Journal Constitution, various photographs). They got the doorknobs of their hotel rooms hitting them in the ass on the way out, and their baby fetus posters right along with ‘em.

**I LEARNED…**

The most important skill I’d learned from this was to get over my fears and put my entire experience on the line, say “FUCK IT” once again, and just show all of me to those who completely disagree with me…and that this is alright. For most of my life I’d been scared to disagree with people, not liking conflict of any sort. I’d realized this was not something to beat myself up for, but instead use it to my benefit of wanting a better life for my people, but also had to learn not to back down from differing opinions. When placed on the front line with folks who knowingly disagreed with me, I couldn’t run—I had to stand there and PROVE to them on all sides that I had a right to have these views, AND these rights, and a life experience to show for them. Now, simply stated, if I can talk to them, I can talk to anyone. I got a right to speak just like anyone else. Hell, better late than never to realize this, and I’d shank anyone that tries to take my voice away from me.

I’ve also learned the importance of articulating myself around these issues in a written way—despite me being a poet for half of my life, and all of my outrage and tension flying to the page whenever I got the urge, it’s something different to write it out in, say, article form, blog form (cheap plug: asaltwithadeadlyklefta.blogspot.com), and any other important, semi-academic written form. I realized that this is a skill that not only makes me highly anxious, but that I also LOVE to do, and can be very beneficial for me when I enter my RJ work.

Overall, I’ve just learned to abandon my fears and hold steadfast to my beliefs. I’ve had countless conversations with the amazing elders (and older sisters, ahem Heidi), who informed me and the other intern Rhiannon to “keep our fire”, that “being in the struggle is a privilege”, and other words of wisdom from women who’ve been there. This summer was possibly the first time I’d realized that my beliefs were going to be not A part, but THE part of my RJ work. It cemented that I have to be fearless, compassionate, inspired daily, and have a willingness to learn in order to be in the RJ field, which I’m almost certain I want to work in after leaving Hampshire. I have a keen sense of how the world is, but I know also how I know it can be, and there are multiple reasons why I stand in this fight alongside like-minded folk.

**WHAT I WOULD’VE DONE DIFFERENTLY…**

If I had the opportunity to actually meet with a lot of the groups that I researched for my Community Mapping Project, that would have been great. It was another way for me to bust out of my shell and actually meet/articulate the reasons for me doing the project, and its benefits for SisterSong. Heidi later
informed me that groups don’t really meet during the summer though. Also we realized we didn’t have enough time to do so anyway, with OSA and the EJ/RJ convening also being a part of my experience there. In all reality, I think that’s all I would’ve changed, because I really really really loved and appreciated every minute of being in SisterSong, in Atlanta, sharing ample girl-time with Rhiannon and Heidi, having lunch everyday, and of course the get-togethers at Heidi’s house. I certainly met some other amazing groups when I was there—the wonderful ladies of SPARK, and the other queer RJ organizations, a bulk of which I met at the Dyke, Dick and Drag Derby event where we competed in softball, egg relay races, and obstacle courses like 4th graders in the park. (I’ll be ringing their phones soon). Being around all those queer folk was pretty sweeeet, since when I thought about it, the SisterSong office was…well, rather straight (with the exception of Kai). Who was I gonna talk to about my “relationships”, without having to break down how we get it done? (I mean, they understood, but that conversation did come up sometimes. Meh.)

I feel my queerness was also catapulted to the forefront of my identity, almost second to how it is at Hampshire—only this time, it was to rally against folks’. I found myself in various situations where I was forced to address my queerness, the reasons why I was queer, and so on—to southern folk who just didn’t get it. I performed at open mics where we were one in our blackness, but to hear the host shout to the audience “where all my straight dudes at?” made me feel more than unwelcome, and forced me to get up onstage and do a poem about me coming out to my mom (and of course, I still got the hi-fives afterwards). It felt good to not put my own needs and concerns on the backburner any longer, or to hide who I was in order to nurse anyone’s ignorance. Atlanta’s a city full of contradictions—there are times like Gay Pride, Dyke March, and even in most neighborhoods where I pull out the beads and roar to the top of my lungs, and times when I felt I needed to downplay my queerness, because I just don’t feel like it. But nevertheless, I’ve learned not to be ashamed of all that I am, and if that makes you uncomfortable, then maybe you need to check yourself. I cannot swallow these words any longer.

MY FUTURE IN RJ
I realized almost instantly that I was going to do RJ work, because it just made sense—it’s everything I’d been fighting for my entire life, just in separate ways. To finally have a framework that groups all of the necessities (acknowledgement and incorporation of race, class, gender, sexuality, and abelism into social justice work) together in order for us all to be free makes me exhale…a lot. I FREAKIN LOVE the city of Atlanta so much too that I’m DEFINITELY going back—the culturally black history, the overabundance of queers—both in visibility and in voice, and the many available networks and opportunities to build relationships with other like-minded or closely oriented organizations. The world of RJ is alive and well, with all its power and its pressures, triumphs and difficulties, in Atlanta. Plus, the nightlife ain’t so bad either, though I didn’t get to experience it like I’d liked to, as I’m creepin up on 21
(but apparently almost doesn't count). I had my share though, don't get me wrong. And, simply put, I WILL be back…

FOR THE FUTURE INTERNS:

CHOOSE SISTERSONG. I can't stress it enough. This organization, and the staff within, does all that they can to ensure that interns have a fulfilling, interactive, inspiring, amazing, anything-but-boring summer. I often remember Heidi saying interns were her way of “getting work done…and giving back”, which means that this isn’t just getting office work out of the way for them, but truly a way to build healthy, fun relationships with young organizers, and ensuring that the internship plants seeds for their later lives. If Heidi is the supervisor again, then you'll DEFINITELY have an amazing time—she’s not big on sitting in the office, so trust you'll be on the go, but still expected to get your work done though. She’s full of laughs, anecdotes, and inspiration that NEVER get old (she even called us her 'ladybugs'!). Still, the whole office made sure I interacted with as many other organizations as I could, and see a full picture of Atlanta as a city as well. They told me over and over again to use them as references, contacts, and networks, and never to be a stranger when I return. And honestly, I have NO reason to.