

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**RYE YOUNG**

**Interviewer:** Michelle Esther O'Brien

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**Transcribed by** Christina Samuels

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle Esther O'Brien and I will be having a conversation with Rye Young for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Libraries Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is November 2, 2017 and this is being recorded at the NYU [New York University] Department of Sociology. Hello!

Rye Young: Hello!

O'Brien: How are you doing?

Young: I'm doing pretty good, thank you.

O'Brien: Um, let's - tell me what your job is.

Young: Um, I am the Executive Director of Third Wave Fund, formerly Third Wave Foundation.

O'Brien: And what is Third Wave? What does it do?

Young: Third Wave is a grant-making organization that supports young women of color, queer and trans youth of color, and low-income youth-led organizing, broadly defined under the banner of gender justice work. Um, we support organizations nationally, specifically focused on groups and regions that are historically under-resourced.

O'Brien: Mhm, do you all fund organizations in New York?

Young: We do!

O'Brien: Which ones?

Young: Um—

O'Brien: To get a sense of the—

Young: Yeah well so historically we've funded, um, many of the sort of movement building hubs led by queer and trans people of color, namely FIERCE, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Audre Lorde Project, um, we've funded Queers for Economic Justice before they shut down, we've funded a number of organizations before they shut down [laughter], CASA Atabex Ache, Sisters on the Rise, Brooklyn Young Mothers Collective, um, we just made a new grant to the Womanhood Project in the south Bronx, um, in New York City I'd say generally the queer groups have survived and the non-queer groups that have been specifically women of color-led have not. Not that you asked but I just realized that as I said it.

O'Brien: Yeah that's remarkable. Um, how long have you been at that job?

Young: I've been in this role closing out my fourth year, um, I started as an intern in 2008.

O'Brien: Mhm. And broadly what are your responsibilities?

Young: Oh my god! Um...

O'Brien: Are you mostly fundraising?

Young: Uh, it's weird, I started, uh, this role as the only staff person in 2014 where my job was really relaunching the organization after it had institutionally shut its 501(c)(3) doors and we were setting back up on a shoestring budget and didn't have any money to do grants or have any staff, so at that point my job was like setting up a storage unit and tearing down our server system and starting up a new system and creating, um, an organization, not from scratch but institutionally from scratch and trying to build off our legacy and our community of supporters to create a resource base that had to be rebuilt and then over time it's been growing the budget through fundraising, but fundraising in the way that would allow us to fund radical work and not necessarily just get huge. So, um, it was really a lot of grassroots fundraising work and now it feels like my job is—well before that my job was also designing grantmaking programs that would put our radical values into a process and model that would support organizations to define for themselves—to define what they were going to do and how they were going to do it. And in the process over time as we got bigger it was really supporting our staff to do that work and doing a lot of things that people don't like to do which is like major donor fundraising, um, a lot of supervision, a lot of working with the board to help them be their best selves and that's a lot of my job.

O'Brien: AS a former board member who's not always my best self I— [laughter]

Young: Yeah, they want to do so good [laughter]

O'Brien: Yeah [laughter] and so Third Wave is a queer and trans inclusive feminist organization?

Young: Well it's weird because—

O'Brien: That's [inaudible]

Young: All of our staff are queer and about 85% of our board is queer and so it's weird, um, the word inclusion feels weird and, um, like I was just—we just did our third annual gender bash a few weeks ago and our coworker—my coworker, Nicole [Myles], was like—do I need to worry that all of our performers and all of our djs and most of our performers are people of color or is that going to alienate white people?—And I was like—No like that's what—we're one of the few places where people would ask that question and I think that the idea of inclusion at Third Wave when we're intentionally centering people that have been excluded is kind of odd. It's just an odd, um, construct for us. So we are queer and trans integral, yeah.

O'Brien: And tell me about how your identity and how you read fits into that.

Young: Um, well so I came to Third Wave as a lesbian-identified cis but curious about trans umbrella young person at, I think I was 22. For the record I'm white-identified, like half Ashkenazi Jewish half Christian blend [laughter]. And class privilege, grew up in Scarsdale, NY. Grounded myself at that time, not necessarily in Jewish political activism but a little bit more in the Palestine solidarity community which kind of kept me away from what would become my kind of like Jewish activist queer family but that's another story. Um, so at that time that's kind of what my identity was. I felt like I fit in at Third Wave in a way though I was aware that it was specifically centering women of color and their experiences and so my role felt like, yes I fit here and I know that it's a balance and it's not not for me but it's for me to the extent that I am working towards the liberation of all women of color and that my freedom is a part of that. And I—so I think that it challenged me in that way, I think I've grown a lot over that time. When I was starting at Third Wave I was also in culinary school so I was part-time interning part-time in culinary school and then I became a staff person there the same time that I left culinary school and started as a line cook so I was at that time also starting to transition—or just like not sure what was going on. I was like playing with pronouns, I was playing with names and I knew I wanted top surgery and that was all. And it was really weird how I was starting to really explore this at a time when my work life felt like a gender binary. Like, on the one hand it was like the macho male-dominated cooking industry of New York City, and the like feminist like all women identified space of Third Wave. And that was really odd and the more I masculinized the more I went towards Third Wave. And I think that's a complicated things and, um, I think it's also I don't know I guess I see it as problematic at this point the way that it feels really comfortable—it felt really comfortable for me to masculinize and feel really comfortable within this feminist environment where I knew trans women of color often didn't feel comfortable and trans women in general didn't feel comfortable. I didn't realize how—how true that was until years of being there where I was like—oh, this isn't part of our rich history this is, um, often an exception to the rule—and so started to just kind of see my place in this work differently started like inspecting my comfort level, started reading a lot about trans experiences and just how gendered they are and classed and raced so, um, yeah I think about my position in this work all the time and it does feel like a microcosm of, uh, feminism in general. Like, I'm very much in this like living fabric of an evolving and stuck kind of ideology at all times. So, yeah, [laughter] that's a long answer.

O'Brien: Uh, perfect. Um, so let's loop around to talking about Third Wave but for the moment back up into sort of how you came to it. So before we started your interview you mentioned you used to be Republican.

Young: Yes [laughter].

O'Brien: Tell us about that.

Young: I mean to the extent that like I was 18 and had—felt that I was political. I would read The Economist and the New York Times and I, like, kind of wanted to have like this politically powerful mind and at the time it was really steeped in a lot of Republican—but like certain kind of

Republican like a rich, like blue state Republican. Like sort of elitist mentality like I can be socially progressive but don't touch my tax dollars kind of thing. Um, so my parents were—well not at this point in time—but when I was growing up they were both like Republican-leaning on the, like, Libertarian spectrum. Um, where I think a lot of, like, Lefties feel alignment and then a huge departure. It was like—whoa!

O'Brien: What happened there?

Young: So, in this situation, like, they were very Libertarian, um, we'd have political debates at home all the time, we'd get in big arguments all the time, we're that kind of family. Um, and in my senior year of high school I was the kid who would stand up in front of the school and debate pro-Iraq War and really like feel like I had my talking points down, I felt like I was thinking independently.

O'Brien: What year was that?

Young: That was in 2004 that I was kind of at the, like, peak Republican.

O'Brien: Right after the— [inaudible].

Young: It was the boom before the bust.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Young: So that was, like, everything was leading up to war and everything was pointing in that direction and I was definitely, like, a very influential young person, I would, like, try to convince people and I was, like, very good at getting people to, like, see why we [laughter] should be invading Iraq and it was like—yeah—um, that was me. So—

O'Brien: And were you queer?

Young: Not, like, expressed that way, persay. I was part of like the Gay-Straight Alliance. I was butch presenting, I was always, um, a weirdo, like always had a drumstick in my socks and always had dyed hair and then shaved my hair, um, so I was like—I looked like a dyke and I was dating a boy who looked like a girl so we were always like a little, like, queer, but I didn't have the language for it at the time. A lot of my friends were the only out kids and there never seemed to be a distinction between me and them.

O'Brien: And you mentioned class privilege, what did your parents do? What was there—

Young: Well, so my parents jumped multiple classes in the course of their life and much of it happened, like, right around when they had kids so, um, my mom grew up in a large building in Far Rockaway, Queens and she shared a room with her brother, they had a very small apartment, I think—I would call them like low-income, like, working class, um, I think she's a third generation

New York City Jewish person who, um, she met my dad while she had just graduated from Brooklyn College, um, he had dropped out of college and moved to New York City. He grew up in Ohio in like somewhere between rural and urban kind of situation and I would say he was probably somewhere between—somewhere in the, like, middle class but it's hard—it's hard to know exactly because there's not—I don't have a lot of, like, information to go off but I always pry every time I go home. Like—how big were your rooms? how many people lived there? Like, what did your mom do?—Like, I'm trying to ask all of these questions but anyway so they met in, um, in oh God, in New York City in the early 70s I would say and then they moved into a loft, um, near or above CBGB's [Country, Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers] I can't—I don't know the actual details—

O'Brien: So very close to hear.

Young: Yeah, very close to hear. And, um, like my dog was named SoHo because it's [inaudible] that in a theater in SoHo. Um, I have the Mamoun's t-shirt that they got on one of their first dates, that's threadbare and my favorite shirt in the world. Um, yeah, so they met there and then what happened was my mom, I don't think worked—I don't think she worked— and my dad had no college degree, um, he had dropped out of Kent State and was—had largely, like, football. He had odd jobs, like he would be a line cook for a while, he would scoop ice cream for a while he would just kind of do whatever and then he started doing small contracting gigs and then I guess this guy took him under his wing and taught him like here's a toolbox, here's how you use it and then kind of sent him out for bigger and bigger jobs and then from there he literally just got a loan from the bank. He went in, he looked like a good ole' boy, and he was like—I want to start a business called Young Construction—um, he got a bunch of money, he started doing renovations [horn honk] that were bigger and then he put any money he earned into buying property and started a home building business with no training, just did it and was trusted by the banks.

O'Brien: Credit counts for—

Young: Over and over. [laughter]

O'Brien: Yeah!

Young: Oh my God so—and my mom at that point, um, at one point his first home that he had built himself was on the market for too long an it was like some bubble had burst in the economy and, um, I was just born and my mom—we were—we were like on the brink of declaring bankruptcy and my mom figured out that she could—that our property taxes were too high and we had just moved to Scarsdale at that point so somehow they went from a loft in TriBeCa to a tiny home on the outskirts of Scarsdale right on the Mamaroneck border. And she figured out—she's a very cunning person, also very difficult person—she figured out that she could sue the town court and get our property taxes lowered and then fast forward we didn't declare bankruptcy, she decided this could be a business, that she could be hired to be a pain in the ass with the city—with the town courts and just get people's taxes lowered and practice—

O'Brien: Wow!

Young: The only kind of law that you can practice without a law degree. Which she did, all of this sounds, like, ridiculous but true so now they have this thing where, like, my dad puts all of our liquid money into land and buys property and builds homes, my mom earns several hundred thousand a year that keeps them afloat and building wealth then my dad sells a home, puts it into more land and they've just become rich that way.

O'Brien: Wow.

Young: It's a really wacky story but my oldest sister, like, she only had Salvation Army clothing, fast forward to me and, like, I never thought twice about money.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Young: Um, so we have, even between the five years of like my oldest sister being born and then me, we have a very, very different class experience, um, and yeah.

O'Brien: And credit, property, property development, tax resistance, I mean these are sort of core themes—

Young: They really are.

O'Brien: Of suburban whiteness in America, yeah?

Young: They really are. Yeah, um, and the bedrock of their Republican leanings—

O'Brien: Of course.

Young: Was protecting that kind of class status very explicitly. It's not like that was like—well, you know, it's for the greater good— like, they're really clear that they want to hold onto that kind of wealth and they see it as a bootstraps story and they think that it's their own cunning, you know, wise ways which is, you know, part of it—they couldn't have done that without being cunning, in my mom's case, like, total pains in the ass and fully driven to support three kids and I think my dad is coming to realize that, like, the only way that was possible is because he was white and could pass for middle class—

O'Brien: [inaudible]

Young: So, yeah, so anyway, so then back to being Republican. So that's what I was raised in and then I think the Iraq War really flipped my brain over itself where I was part of an alternative school program in my high school that was like, kind of where the offbeat, weird kids would go— elect into—and do no gym class and instead do hippie-dippy things like community meetings

where we, like, self-governed and didn't follow the rules of the school and it was—I loved it and I think it was a—it was a place where I could influence a lot of people and people really looked up to me and I was like go war and they were like—what!—sit down for a second so in that process I, uh, before graduating I was able to do a senior project and it was like basically research on anything you want. I decided to research from a political science angle, like—can democracies be created from the outside in?—that was my question. I felt like—

O'Brien: Related to the Iraq War?

Young: Yeah, I was like if that's—if this is the question and the answer is yes then maybe there is some merit to what we're doing. If the answer is no then it's clearly wrong, um, and I kind of made that the deciding question for me. And so then I researched that project, I interned at the Bard [College] Globalization and International Affairs program which is steeped in like a George Soros kind of political framework of neoliberalism, kind of new world order stuff so I was very—I was starting to see how that kind of thinking, my parents' kind of thinking was, uh, really harmful. I started to read a lot of writing about the global economy and just modern American politics in general from a critical perspective and that was the first exposure I had to those ideas then I was basically piecing together that every historic attempt to create a democracy from the outside in has utterly failed and backfired in every conceivable iteration you could find in history so I think at that point I was like—well, they must know this! [laughter]—like, they must be looking for a failure of democracy but also a weakened state in general that could be rebuilt and/or kept perpetually unstable for our benefit and that all added up much more than any other possibility I could imagine and at that point I became a true, like, government skeptic and really, not just became Democrat but became a full-on skeptic of all the parties and just, yeah didn't belong to any one kind of school, so that's where I went into Bard College with like this opened up brain—less rejecting Republicanism and more wanting to deconstruct everything and just kind of understand it, all the little blocks, and take them apart. So that's kind of what I tried to do when I was at Bard and it—um, you know, while being a queer about town and like wanting to, you know, just be a part of a different social life that was a lot more exciting than what Scarsdale, NY allowed [laughter].

O'Brien: And Bard, geographically, is accessible to the city?

Young: Um, it depends what you call accessible, it's probably—if you were driving straight from Bard to New York it's probably a little over two hours.

O'Brien: Okay.

Young: Um, you can kind of take the train but you also still kind of need a car to do that so I went to Bard and then—it was probably a great place for me intellectually to be because of this path that I was on, it's very much a place for, like critical theory and a place for—just really trying to look what's behind things and understand what's going on. So, that's what I did and I studied Arabic language, culture, and literature as part of, uh, I don't know maybe it was feeling a lot of guilt and shame about how ignorant I was and how little I thought about culture and history in

my understand—even that question thinking that the Iraq War would be justifiable if you could build a democracy from the outside in says nothing to agency and autonomy and sort of, like—what is our relationship to that place and is it a healthy one or an unhealthy one. And so that was, I think, part of me wanting to bring—try and learn and reckon and actually absorb the massiveness of what another culture is and how ignorant it kind of is to think you can go in and make something better, especially as a young, dumb country. That was—that was I think part of what I was trying to do with that. And then, through my studies I went to Morocco and studied there for a summer and studied in Jordan for a semester and in both of those situations, but primarily in Jordan, got a huge dose of education around Palestine-Israel politics and did a similar sort of deconstruction of Zionism for myself and realizing, like, ohh I’ve been taking a bath in a whole lot of lies when it comes to my just general either indifference or acceptance of the state of Israel and realized as I was growing up it was—oh, well it’s just so complicated—and then realized that, like, actually yes it’s complicated but it’s also not hard to see what’s right and what’s wrong so when I was there I was like—holy crap—so then that sort of got me feeling just very committed to the issue of Palestinian rights and the struggle for sovereignty. And so I came back, that was in my second semester of my sophomore year, had quickly cycled through all of the Arabic language classes that Bard [College] had to offer and started going more into, kind of, critical theory and designed my own studies of Edward Said classes and just kind of, like, did whatever [laughter] I wanted in a way from like junior year until I graduated, which I think again just took me down having all this time to think about political theory and never took a Feminist Studies class, never took a Gender Studies class my whole life so that’s one thing I think is odd. People think I was a Gender Studies major but I was friends with all of the Gender Studies majors and I dated the Gender Studies majors but I never went to a class. I was more involved in student labor dialogue, I was more involved in—I started a Palestine solidarity organization at Bard and went to Palestine with Al-Awda, the Palestine Right of Return Coalition. So I was just kind of involved in different things really trying to look at classism and structural racism at my time at Bard and looked at the LGBTQ group as politically irrelevant to me, I guess. Like, I saw it as—why do you all exist?—they handed out condoms at parties, they talked about their queer stories, but I just felt like it’s not—it’s an apolitical space entirely and I just didn’t care for that at all. I was more into, like, the nudist magazine on campus, just like, just doing things that actually felt like they were transforming—had the power to address something beyond just having sex with who we want and loving who we want. That didn’t really appeal to me so —and even to this day I’ve really come into the LGBTQ movement really through work and as a trans person in that space who is white everyone always assumes I was part of this LGBTQ movement and it’s odd because I feel so strange in that space and I feel much more comfortable when I’m at an abortion conference or in some kind of feminist environment and so that’s very weird to me and I know that there are cis women of color who have been part of Third Wave who are queer-identified who are never seen as queer. They’re always assumed to be from the women’s funding community or somewhere far from the LGBTQ funders so I, I don’t know, I find that—yeah I was very critical—I would come to the LGBTQ meeting to just try to activate them a little bit around criminalization of HIV and things that I saw as very important parts of the queer liberation work but they were always like—oh yeah that would be good—and then that was it. So anyway, so I guess coming out of Bard it was really rad to find Third Wave because I was thinking, like—wow,

this is a place to be in a feminist, queer environment that is addressing racism and classism from that place—and I never knew that that existed, I never thought I would find that.

O'Brien: Did you intern straight out of college?

Young: I went through, like, a very depressing sort of four month period of just kind of like—five months or so—of applying to everything under the sun and finding nothing and then seeing an internship pop up, maybe into, like, late September and applied for that and just had my mind blown about like—wow this is everything that I could have ever wanted—

O'Brien: So this is 2009?

Young: This is 2008.

O'Brien: So, like probably had some contraction of funding?

Young: Not yet. So right before the recession Third Wave was actually its biggest it had ever been. Monique Mehta was on—she was transitioning out—she maybe had a couple months left when I started and then Mia Herndon was stepping in. They had secured a lot of foundation funding at that point and had made big ins with some major donors, mostly second wave feminist donors and before the recession—philanthropy is delayed by a year usually—institutional philanthropy—because it's based on a projection of the stock market and so even if the stock market crashes midway through a grant cycle it's only going to show up in the next year's grants. So what happened was in 2008 when I came on we were actually going—we were actually at the start of a hiring spree and so I didn't realize that when I came on it was perfect timing and there would be a place for me and a budget for me to continue doing work as a staff person. That was after interning for maybe eight or nine months. And that internship was paid, it was above minimum wage, I forget what the fee was but it was part time and I had random jobs here and there on the side. At the same time I was also interning at Rides for Women's Safety and that internship ended and Third Wave just kept reupping me and then told me they would hire. They also hired a bunch of other positions while I was there and grew the staff to maybe eight people? Which, you know, I had no context for knowing that was maybe a lot for us, historically.

O'Brien: And this is in the midst of the stock market fiscal crisis.

Young: Yeah, and at the time, like, I don't think people knew how long it would last. There was a sense that things would come back together soon and I also didn't have context to know that, like, part of our expansion didn't just have to do with a political shift in philanthropy but the kinds of shifts that are allowed when the stock market is good. And that's kind of—that's something that I've taken with me as we've rebuilt and regrown ourselves is a deep skepticism of the field of philanthropy and why a funder would come to fund Third Wave, um—

O'Brien: So, break that down a little bit more—so they're more open to radical ideas when the stock market is good.

Young: Yes. And then when it goes bad there's a harkening back, a conservative tightening the belt towards what the funder actually believes is essential.

O'Brien: Right.

Young: Versus, um, things that program officers can get away with—cause usually the program officers are much more left-leaning than the Board who has to approve things. The board is less scrutinizing of what they push through when there is more money, right, and so then program officers can sneak things in, they can give these kinds of grants that aren't massive but are a bit, like, in this discretionary realm and were often like a pet project grant, right, like a funder who is like—I've loved you forever, I've always wanted to be in philanthropy so I can fund the groups I love—turns out it's not as easy as that and it takes a lot of backflips and finagling and the right place and the right time.

O'Brien: So You're talking about a program officer and a Board at some very large foundation.

Young: Or a—or a private, smaller foundation.

O'Brien: Okay.

Young: But the point is that, like, I think that movement building—

O'Brien: This is a very interesting—

Young: Yeah, and I think that political organizing isn't treated as the best solution we have, it's treated as something fun to play with when there's extra money.

O'Brien: As opposed to what that's other sorts of funds—

Young: As opposed to service provision, leadership development that's divorced from political activism, um, as opposed to, you know, there's all kinds of healthcare that isn't about structural change but it's just about service delivery and public health kinds of models, uh, I guess high-level advocacy that isn't grassroots based but is just kind of—

O'Brien: Policy—

Young: Policy kind of like Center for American Progress, kind of—

O'Brien: Right.

Young: Organizations, the larger nationals, ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], those kind of organizations, very, very little going to community-led work.

O'Brien: So, outline the model a little bit. So you have big foundations and private foundations working with chunks of money and then they provide a large grant to Third Wave that then redistributes it to—

Young: Yeah—

O'Brien: Movement building—

Young: Yup—

O'Brien: Feminist youth, queer youth—

Young: Yeah, there is kind of two dynamics, there's the dynamics at the top of foundations and then there's, like, what's happening on the ground—

O'Brien: Yeah—

Young: That need an intermediary so I think about it like a garden, like, you're hosing a big bed of plants, right, and big philanthropy, even if it wanted to support small organizations it's just a big sloppy hose, like, crushing small groups, it wouldn't actually be effective. So I think of an intermediary as, like, putting a nozzle that's a light spray so that groups can get more strong and absorb bigger grants, um—

O'Brien: So here then the nozzle is Third Wave and the plants are small organizations—

Young: Right and we're, like, thinking about just distribution so it's not just in one corner of the garden it's actually spread out. That's how I think of it, and there's sort of structural needs where if we expect funding to reach small organizations, foundations that are big usually have this id— well, they usually just have straight up policies that say that their grant can't account for say, more than 30 percent of a group's budget which is kind of responsible, that makes sense, but they also have policies simultaneously that they won't give away grants that are below, let's say, half a million dollars.

O'Brien: Right.

Young: So let's say then you have a situation where—

O'Brien: It completely shuts out small groups.

Young: All groups have to have at least \$1.5 million in order to get a grant. So, for Third Wave we have to make the case to not just fund those groups but to work with another institution to fund those groups and so, in tight budget years they're looking at where do you cut costs and then scrutinize—well we're paying for two kinds of operations, the operations of the organization and the operations of the intermediary, as opposed to the programmatic work—so I remember very

clearly talking to a big funder right when the recession was happening who was tightening their belt and was cutting out almost all intermediary funders, Third Wave in particular. And when we were asked why she said—well, it's really hard to make a case right now for intermediaries because all of the operations and overhead and we could just fund the groups ourselves—so then we showed the whole docket of groups that we funded, all of whom were radical, intersectional young women of color- and queer/trans folks of color-led and we were like—great, which ones are you going to fund directly and how are you going to do that to support their success?—and she was like—honestly, none of them—so it really is this kind of false premise that it's a critique of model but it's actually kind of political leanings of the organizations. So, that's, uh, that's why I'm very skeptical of big grants and that's why even though we angle for certain ones we really are building reserves—building our reserves at all times and working with individual donors and foundations that are squarely politically aligned with us, um, as like the cornerstone of our budget and if we add on bigger grants we ask them to be smaller so that they won't topple us when they go away because we know they will, we're never going to be a big foundation's—a big, mainstream foundation's four-year grantee and we know that and we do pass that knowledge onto our groups that we fund that get excited when we get bigger and we're like —it's not if but when you're not the exciting community du jour, when your region is not succeeding anymore, when the recession happens this money goes away and what's going to be left?—And that's a lot of how we structure our grantmaking to encourage that kind of long-term devotion to sustainability and devotion to, like, making sure there's alignment between the political aims and the financial basis for the organizations.

[pause]

O'Brien: So interesting!

[laughter]

O'Brien: So, I have more questions on this. But so you came on in 2008, you were hired, and then what happened between then and being the only staff?

Young: Well, I was hired in 2009, um—

O'Brien: Okay—

Young: As a part time program assistant—

O'Brien: Yeah—

Young: At that time I was also a line cook and one of the—and just to paint a picture I was also busting my ass to pay for top surgery, um, I wasn't male-identified at that time but I was flat-chested identified [laughter] I would say, so I was working seven days a week, 80-hour weeks, I was line cooking Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, and then I was Third Wave-ing from Tuesday to Friday.

O'Brien: As an intern?

Young: As a part-time program assistant.

O'Brien: And top surgery health insurance is not a part of the part-time benefits...

Young: No, it was not! And even if it was, there was no coverage for top surgery under any plan at that time that I knew of. So, at the time what led me to busting my ass for top surgery was actually an infusion of money right before I became a line cook while I was still in culinary school that came from Warner Brothers Pictures because my house it just so happened—in Queens—was right next to a graveyard where Kevin Smith was filming a movie. He liked our house and he had scouts come by and come to us with this piece of paper saying—we're from Warner Brothers, we're going to produce a film—the film was called "A Couple of Dicks" originally, it changed its name to "Cop Out". it was a Kevin Smith movie starring Tracy Morgan and what's—Bruce Willis and Stifler, I can't remember the actual guy's name but the guy from "American Pie". Um, so they decided to film the movie at my house and we negotiated with them so we had six people in one house, we got \$36,000 to split it evenly. And so while I was in culinary school I was put up in a hotel, it filmed over the summer, um, there are so many funny stories about that but that's also another Oral History Project maybe [laughter]. But then so I got \$6,000 and my surgery was going to be like \$8,500 when I counted travel, I was going to the Bay and everything so, so I had this chunk of money so I was like I feel confident I could raise the rest by the time I have my actual appointment 'cause, you know, they book these things forever away so I booked it, like, nine months out. So I left culinary school, graduated, got a line cooking job, got hired at Third Wave, like everything was kind of working except I was completely destroyed, I was binding while I was working 80 hours a week, I was getting, like, cuts and burns, it was very hard and emotionally hard and it was just very difficult to, like, go from being a line cook and the mentality you need to survive as a line cook to the mentality it takes to really do well at Third Wave. They're very different and it felt like the deepest compartmentalizing I've ever had to do in my life [laughter] which I think is also hard when you're starting to transition, like, having to always compartmentalize and always pick and choose where you're going to be what and when I had such, like, skewed professional lives and trajectories that both felt real and both felt very intense and kind of all consuming, it was—it was a real mind fuck. Um, what happened was I did get top surgery, I quit my line cooking job so I could heal, there's no, like, short-term disability when you're a line cook. I did take short-term disability from Third Wave, took a month off and when I was recovering I got a call from them saying they wanted to hire me full-time as a, I think Program Associate so I got like a promotion and a full-time salary and a raise and insurance and that was like—felt like the first time I had a job job that, like—where I could just do one thing. I was the first person in my family, I believe, to ever work in an office, on both sides. My dad's side is all factory work and farming and my mom's side was, like, jewelers and whatever whatever, my sisters are artists and my parent's worked from—my dad worked out of a truck and my mom worked from home. So, when I told them about this job they were like—why are you working for someone? That's so weird. You go to an office?—Everyone was just confused about—

O'Brien: You're an employee?

Young: Yeah!—You're an employee where you can also be queer?—They just didn't understand, like, I would go to work dressed, like, casual and, um, you know, they were just like I don't get this place—and they didn't necessarily understand philanthropy. My mom called me an abortionist at a party once because she didn't know what else to call me. She called Third Wave the "Third Grave" for a while because I was also—my internship was running our abortion fund, which was an exciting thing so when I was running the abortion fund and I was transitioning I was like—wait a minute, light bulb why do we talk about abortion as just women— and so that was when even though I was being supervised by someone else and they were being supervised by someone else and I was an intern when I was writing our annual report around abortion fund I was like, I think—I think we need to just change this and gender-neutralize the language and make a blurb about why—and that ended up being in 2000—it got published in 2010. That was the first abortion report to be written in a gender-neutral way, which then kicked off a whole other kind of controversy that I ended up being, not in the middle of but a contributor to, I would say, this question of whether, um, just this question of trans inclusion in reproductive rights and what kinds of shifts that should really mean in terms of language and the overarching frame— political framework for the work.

O'Brien: Hostility in that debate as far as gender is really quite intense.

Young: It's quite intense.

O'Brien: People really freaked out about it.

Young: People really, um, I got into a fight with Katha Pollitt in the pages of The Nation [Magazine] about it. I was, at the time, on the Board of the New York Abortion Access Fund, in part recruited because of my work doing abortion funding at Third Wave but also for being an outspoken trans leader in the abortion funding world and so, yeah... But Third Wave had my back around that, you know, they defended it. I think sometimes being a funder just meant that we got a little bit less blowback than if we were in any other positionality in the movement-building world. Um, and now I don't even remember the question so I'm going to slow my roll.

O'Brien: Could we do a break?

Young: Yeah, of course!

O'Brien: Okay.

O'Brien: So you are making—where were we at?—pioneering advances in trans inclusion in abortion debates—

Young: Yes.

O'Brien: And getting hired full-time, getting recovered from top surgery—

Young: Yes.

O'Brien: And the economy has collapsed—

Young: The economy has collapsed...

O'Brien: And philanthropy is about to contract very intensely.

Young: Yeah, and at the time, Third Wave staff and Board made the call to increase our grantmaking and tap into our reserves, um, counting on the idea that the recession would be short-term, counting on the idea that other funders are retracting so this is actually a time that our money is going to have a bigger impact than at other times.

O'Brien: When, like, funding be countercyclical.

Young: Right, and then also counting on the idea that when the stock market does increase again and giving from foundations increases again that it would go back to supporting social justice at the same level that it was supporting in prior to the recession, but none of those things happened [laughter]. So it was longer than anyone expected—well the only thing that was true was number two, that other funders pulled back. Um, so we were providing really important funding, we were giving a lot of funding that was kind of, like, supporting groups on their last legs that were really important, politically speaking, Young Women's Empowerment Project, Different Avenues, Queers for Economic Justice, um—

O'Brien: I was an Executive Director in the middle of all of that and my agency ran out of money and I had to lay everybody off—

Young: Yeah, so that was really tough and so—but again I didn't understand how far down we could go. I didn't know how for Third Wave to exist a lot of magic has to be in place. It doesn't—it's not just there and I didn't really get that—I didn't really get that for our grantees, like I didn't really quite understand how unstable and hard it is to actually run an organization, particularly for people most impacted by oppression. Like, I was coming into philanthropy at a time when that was actually being talked about more and more—people most impacted by oppression need to lead the work—but also seeing how little people really understood about what that requires and how little that understanding is baked into the process of philanthropy. And so that's one of the things that I watched so—Oh, wow! So when this thing happens with the money and it goes away, the people most impacted by oppression who in theory we all want to be running this work, they're the ones closing and everyone else is actually kind of fine. They're making cuts but they're not making cuts to their foundation, they're making cuts to the growth that they had experienced in the last few years and that was it—they had—there was lower places that they could go before they closed.

O'Brien: And these—so these divisions between people who had to shut down and people that just cut back on the growth was mostly around race? Or queerness...

Young: And class, and regionality. Yeah, um, 80% of the groups Third Wave has funded that were black-led have shut down since we started. And I remember saying that at a meeting with Funders for Reproductive Equity, formerly Funders for Population Reproductive Health and Rights, where were having a woman of color working meeting specifically talking about supporting leadership of black women but not necessarily their organizations and I brought up—hey, you know, 80% of the black women-led groups we've funded since 1996 have shut their doors, maybe we need to be talking about structural change in our field and not necessarily individualized leaders who are brilliant and there's no doubt that they deserve support and attention and resources but how are they going to thrive if they don't have institutions that are grounded enough to survive the ups and downs. And inevitably when those downs happen and the recession crashes those are times when we need really strong movement power and not just strong voices, right? So that's what I was saying.

O'Brien: So the tension between, like, well-known public intellectuals and actual organizing projects?

Young: Yeah, yes. Yeah like, models that are building community collective power versus what a lot of funders want, which is organizations with very smart, strong, visible Executive Directors. Like, quote unquote, "darlings". Like that's what um—

O'Brien: They actually call them that?

Young: Yeah actually, yes. [laughter] And often people who come from a very different class background than those they purportedly lead. That's a very common type of thing—

O'Brien: So, like, college-educated darlings.

Young: Not just college-educated, Master's degree-having, law degree-having people running organizations that are supposed to, you know, represent economically disenfranchised communities. So, that's kind of what I saw when I—so at Third Wave though what was happening, which I didn't realize at the time, was our institutional power was sinking and our resources were dwindling but my leadership was growing and I think I was just kind of, like, getting a lot of investment from staff, I was being sent around to speak where I thought I had no business speaking but the staff believed in me. I was given professional development funding which was very unusual I thought. Like, none of my friends in nonprofits at any level of leadership that I knew of had that kind of access to travel and speaking and...

O'Brien: Why do you think you received that support?

Young: Well I think it's Third Wave's model, you know, to do leadership development and to build people into philanthropy and not just pull people who already have access. I think that's a political

value that they have. I think I have showed that I was really able to talk to grantees well and make sense of what they were doing to people who were very outside of that world. Funders, um, like I could translate and code switch well with and amongst people who really are so culturally and far apart from where our grantees were. And, so yeah I don't know, I think those were the things that led to just kind of, like, advancing. Then there were—because of huge budget cuts we weren't in a position to lose support level staff, we needed to cut the senior team. So at that point our Program Director—

O'Brien: The money dried up—

Young: Our Operations...

O'Brien: Quickly.

Young: Yeah our Deputy Director, Communications Officer, all were cut. And so it was pretty much just me and an External Relations Manager and our Director after the Board reckoned with the fact that we were not going to get a re-up of funds that we had before the recession hit.

O'Brien: And this is in 2010 or?

Young: Yeah, late 2010, and then...

O'Brien: So most of the staff was laid off—

Young: Yeah and then I got—

O'Brien: And you were—

Young: Promoted to Program Officer and so then our grantees—I was really their main point-person and then our Program—like our External Relations Manager quit in 2012. We rehired that position but really it just wasn't feeling right at a certain point and felt like—oh God! Like, something huge has to give. And I don't—I didn't think we had the time to fix it with the model that we had and I didn't think we had the impetus, like it just wasn't there, it wasn't going to happen, so I quit in 2012 for about a year and I started a catering company, I started a consulting business, I worked at a cafe, I did, like, a lot of things, I ran up a lot of debt and—but it was very relieving to leave actually because there was a lot—it was just a very hard few years and also it was just a long—it was just a hard, you know, I had graduated from college, did this whole, like, double career path thing, transitioned, saw my favorite love—organizational love rise and fall and just watched it in tatters and just felt very exhausted from all of that so I just really needed that year. Then in 2013 they had brought on an interim Director to come in and do damage control and kind of assess and then likely sunset the organization and close up shop.

O'Brien: Who was that?

Young: That was Rosalba Messina who was an interim Director at Funding Exchange and a number of other organizations and, you know, her and the Board and other stakeholders really felt that the 501(c)(3), the model we had, the foundation structure couldn't be sustained another year. We really needed to close up the existing model that was there and what it would turn into and what, um, what the remaining assets would go to was [horn] not defined when I came back on. So I was brought back as a consultant to close up the programs, get final grants, like, tie-off grants and also ended up playing a bit of a role with the stakeholder group that was being convened to figure out the future of the organization and also to bridge that process with our grantees so that there was some way that their collective voice could inform what we did next. And so, I just think I took to that process well, I think I was trusted to hold a lot of responsibility in that process because a lot of the founders knew me, and a lot of the donors knew me, and the grantees knew me and so at that point I kind of was the only person holding the institutional knowledge in place that was required to make a big change. So we put out a request for proposals to see where we would merge or where we would shift our assets and, like, what kind of—how we could continue the legacy of our work if not our institution. So, we got a proposal from Proteus Fund. That was the only one where it was like—come park here and try to rebuild and be independent and we'll manage all of the back end and operations and charge you very little. Every other proposal was like—we'll just acquire you and maybe continue funding parts and pieces of the work but that's about it. So at the time people were like—well, we would want to do Proteus if someone like Rye or Rye who knows a lot of this work and has a vision for this work to continue would serve in that leadership role, basically they were like we could do it in theory if we had a person with a way forward and who knew all the people and the players and the ideology and the history and all that stuff. So that was kind of the ultimatum, like, I either do this or watch it go away. And I didn't think it was a sure thing, like, if we move to Proteus then we're in the clear, I thought we have one year and that's it to decide if it's going to work or not, and it's an experiment and when I made that clear to people, like, I am not going out of position this as if I am definitely going to make this big again or even close to what it was before and I was saying—listen, it might be that we completely close down after a year, it might be that we become an activist-led pooled fund where it's literally just a giving circle of donors who care about the work enough to sustain it and so I'll see my job as building a cross-class giving pool and creating structure for the work and stepping away or we'll rebuild and we'll gain staff but that's going to be a huge process and I need the right team for it and that's when I asked if the current Board would step down from leadership in this new model and support me through being, like, on a Legacy Council, and support me to develop a new Board that had the kind of start-up energy it took to really support a new kind of thing and not exist in the old model. So, that's what happened, I, like, said yes, we set it up, it was a lot of lot of work I don't even know how I did it at this point. Like, I—my coworker Nicole [Myers] was like—Damn, how did you do this all yourself?—like, she just did our Gender Bash and it was very challenging and she was like—how are you doing this and this and this and this and starting everything from scratch and fundraising from nothing—and I was literally like—I don't know, I don't—if I think about it too long it's going to make me feel, uh, just tired [laughter]. Um, so yeah, so that first year and a half I was the only staff person, I was the first trans Director, clearly that had never happened before. Um, I was the first really long-term—I was the first full-time trans person at Third Wave. I thought it would be a bigger deal than it was, um, but in a lot of ways I think, when I came on, a lot of people had

already done all of the work to make it so that—and not just in Third Wave, but in the world—in the country, like, to make it such that when I came on it wasn't newsworthy to a lot of people. I could just run the organization and people listened to what I said and not just my gender, you know? So that was exciting and I was able to build a Board around my vision for the work and I could build—I could—we had no grants so we had no requirements for funders so I could dream big with the grantmaking even though we had no money for it and then I could use that big vision to attract the kind of money that would be excited about radical philanthropy and at the time when I started at Third Wave, like, intersectionality was, like, both new to philanthropy and kind of old in terms of ideology. Like, I remember when I was an intern we went to a 20-year retrospective on intersectionality with Kimberlé Crenshaw at, I think it was NYU [New York University]. And at the time very few funders had talked about it and we were the only ones, we were the lone funder in the corner being like—we need to obliterate issue areas and we need to really drill down on funding communities that have always been oppressed by philanthropy and stop playing these games, right—so we were saying that but that's not how funding was structured and by the time I came through there had been this quote unquote trans tipping point, there had been an explosion of the number of funders that understood what intersectionality was, there was—there were many, like, visible, big movements led by young women of color and the time was just really right for a funder that knew what they were doing with these concepts and knew how to put them into work on the ground. And so, I really benefited from a lot of that and I totally recognize, ooh the way was very paved for me to be able to do this in so many different ways and so yeah, so then I came in and banked on all those things being true and then they were. Now, you know, we're giving the most grants we've ever given in our history.

O'Brien: How big is the budget?

Young: It's \$1.2 million...

O'Brien: And how does that compare to sort of year by year since you've...

Young: So we've been bigger in the past but we were giving away less grants. When I started at Third Wave as the Director in 2013, our budget was about \$85,000.

O'Brien: Wow!

Young: Yeah [laughter]. Um, we had moved into the bank at Proteus \$180,000 was the money we had left. We had no incoming grants that year, we had no major donors give that year except for one new donor that I had brought in through an event and that was it, it was very humble. And then the next year our budget was, I think, 280 [\$280,000]. Um, the first year we didn't make any grants, we just were, like, we need to build a cushion and base it—and develop a grant-making model and then put that model into practice the second year once we have that bundle of funds, so that's what we did. And then, with that small budget we launched a rapid response fund in the summer, called "The Mobilize Power Fund". We made our first grant to the Say Her Name campaign and then were the first womens-focused funder to fund that campaign, even

though it had been around for many, many months. Um, we founded the Black Youth Project 100 with that grant to work on that campaign. We launched it as a crowdfunded grant as well—

O'Brien: So both groups that really were in the midst of the Black Lives Matter upsurge.

Young: Mhmm. And I think we were really trying to identify ourselves as not belonging to one movement and trying to push out from there but actually supporting—saying that gender justice is actually about ending all forms of structural oppression and making sure that there is a gender liberation value within all of those efforts [clunk] and that's really what we do now, and that's what we're continuing to do. So a lot of our funding is, um, it's all women of color- and queer and trans youth of color-led but it's very much within immigration justice, reproductive justice, prison abolition, um, it's focused in, um, building cross-movement hubs in rural areas, it's very much focused in doing education work. Like, it's just very multi-issue. I think that what we decided early on was that issue areas are part of the gatekeeping process in philanthropy, um, the revolving door of—different issues and different approaches to change is actually part of what keeps groups out and we just recognize the issues historically shift but the people oppressed stay the same, largely speaking, you know. Uh, like, you could look at the history of sterilization and how it was used against indigenous women and women of color, broadly, and black women in particular, and you could see how easily that shifted into abortion restriction, targeting those same communities. They might look like the opposite strategy, but the strategy is actually the same. Like, it's different tactics but the same strategy of taking away reproductive freedom as a tool of oppression and so when we look at that we're like—oh, well we don't need dockets that are about abortion or about sterilization, we actually need dockets that are about women of color and are about those folks doing what they know they need to do to not be on that receiving end of bullshit—and that was really, like, our grant-making model. We have now implemented our three core areas of grant-making that were designed around what grassroots movement-building—what leaders have asked us for over the years. So, it's a rapid response fund that makes grants every month. The turnaround is about 10 days to two weeks for funding and we fund, through that fund, 501(c)(3) nonprofits doing standard nonprofit work, 501(c)(4) organizations that do lobbying, as well as groups that fall outside of any one entity. So, that's that.

O'Brien: So, what are groups that fall outside of any one entity?

Young: Well, I could give an example for, um, like Young Women's Empowerment Project technically closed down in 2012? 2011? Um, and they represented everything Third Wave was about. In terms of like any one organization if I could put a pin on it, like, I don't like to do that because we're a very multifaceted organization but, um, YWEP [Young Women's Empowerment Project] was very meaningful to a lot of people who cared about it but also saw it as such a counterpoint to everything that was out there.

O'Brien: So sketch YWEP.

Young: So they—yeah, so they were based in Chicago, IL and they organized young women and girls in the sex trade—in the street economies. And, they shut down—I think a lot of it had to do

with the recession, I think a lot of it had just to do with their work was never meant to exist in philanthropy, and that's just a fact. Um, and it challenges, um, a sort of neoliberal idea of capitalism, kind of like, fundamentally working [laughter]. They just straight up challenged that for a lot of people and YWEP—and they also they were a women and girls organization that clearly stood in opposition to carceral feminism and that was a really big—I mean, how do you survive in [laughter] philanthropy in that space? And I think they were really the target of a lot of anti-trafficking types of legislation that actually harmed sex workers and not just any sex worker but the most vulnerable sex workers, in this case, like, street-based youth. This was just very clear casualty of all of those forces was YWEP closing despite it being a big part of the soul of the RJ [reproductive justice] movement. Like, I think they really represented a lot of possibility, a lot of excitement as far as—wow! Didn't know that could exist, like didn't know anyone was doing work like that—and yet it did. So then when they shut down, it kind of went a little bit—like, the work tucked into other institutions in little ways but we found out a year ago or so that their main organizer was still managing the work, um, of the Street Youth Rise Up campaign and so that campaign, apparently, never really shut down. She was still doing the organizing work and a lot of young people were still involved in that campaign, and so when we actually got an application and when we approved—you know, they had no institution left in terms of like the formal institution—but we PayPal-ed the lead organizer \$3,000 I think it was? Something like that—to pay her and we paid her as essentially a contracted worker for Third Wave—

O'Brien: Wow!

Young: you know, she's doing our mission's work, right, in Chicago so why not! Um, so we do things like that, we'll fund, um—we funded a women of color-led town halls through the Breaking Silence campaign and for most of those it was largely funding a for-profit entity with a sponsorship grant, which corporate philanthropy does a lot where they spend marketing money that is not through any nonprofit model and they don't get any deductions and they sponsor events, basic galas, and they're getting promotion out of it. So what we say there is—well, slap our name on it, we're a sponsor—so we just kind of do that and it's not part of our grant-making budget, it's part of our communications and marketing work. So we just do clever things, we extend our line of credit to groups that, um, they don't have a business model but they're doing convenings, for example, like, activist convenings so we'll book the space on our credit card, things like that. So really just trying to work with whatever people need and realize, like, if the only thing is getting the money to where people need it to go then we can figure out how to do that, right, and that's—that feels important because groups that we're funding outside of the (c)(3) model are doing some of the most grassroots movement-building work of any group on our docket and that's not coincidental, I mean, I think that's by design so, um, a third of our grantees are getting the first grant they've ever gotten. Um, if you zoom in on groups we're funding who are led by trans women of color, for example, it's 80% of those groups have never gotten a grant before us. So we're doing a lot to recognize, like, if we want to fund certain communities that have never gotten this kind of support we can't expect them to have institutions that require money and we need to operate with a very different kind of structure and policies to make sure that we're compliant legally and they aren't vulnerable to scrutiny from the IRS because then we're talking about, like, individual people who could get in trouble and so

we—through Proteus fund they have a legal team, they have a vetting department and they bring a lot more to the table as far as, like, making sure that liability doesn't get—become a trap—like, it doesn't become a legal or financial trap for whoever we're funding. So, yeah so we get to be at an institution that has more capacity to do grantmaking and hold our finances responsibly and we get to fund I think more radically because we have funding coming from so many different places that are really there for the work. Um, we have many, many, many monthly donors, when I came on we had three monthly donors, now we have, like, 180 and a lot of what we say to those folks is, like, there's a lot that we fund that big foundations will never be okay with. Um, for instance, Alisha Walker is a sex worker in Chicago we funded after she got arrested—um, charged with first degree murder for self defense. Um, she killed a "john" that was attacking her and she was charged with first degree murder and we funded her bail, her legal defense, and the movement-building of Support Ho(s)e, which is a grassroots sex worker group in Chicago to really build a campaign around her case. I don't think—it'd be hard to find a foundation now or ever in the US that would do that kind of grant. I don't think Third Wave would have done it seven years ago when we were at our peak and we were answering to big foundations that, you know, we didn't have funding outside of those big funders and second wave feminist funders who would have been really there for that and now we have a huge crew of monthly donors who are giving because of that work and I think that means that we have both, like, the flexibility from our funding model to go there and then we have the cover—the political and the infrastructural cover—to make sure we're doing it legally and don't risk the funding we get from those bigger foundations, you know, so—

O'Brien: Interesting.

Young: That feels really good and now because our model is more streamlined the operations are less costly because we're doing it at a fiscal sponsor. We are giving more away with the same budget we had before, we're giving more away with fewer staff so it feels like we've cracked a few nuts as far as, like, the boring nonprofit stuff goes. Um—

O'Brien: So, there—I mean a lot of the backdrop of what you're sharing about some of these shifts are these critiques of the nonprofit industrial complex—

Young: Yeah.

O'Brien: That over the last fifteen years or so—

Young: Yeah, I actually like to call it the philanthropic industrial complex just to put the right—I think the right protagonist in the in that framework.

O'Brien: Tell us about that, the difference.

Young: Well, I just think that, um, I don't think nonprofits themselves are the root cause of the nonprofit industrial complex, I think that they're responding to a financial system where foundations are choosing to operate the way that they do. Um, there's many ways that they

could operate whereas nonprofits are operating the way that they, more or less, have to in order to survive and do their work so I think they're on the receiving end of, um, material conditions that—where they have the least options and philanthropy has the most.

O'Brien: Very interesting.

Young: Yeah, um, and yeah so, well anyway—and they have the—and foundations have the most at stake in keeping things the same, right, and so I think that when you look at it, they're dishing out the bare minimum of what they can, right, and changing as little as possible to keep things the same and nonprofits are often responding to those things and limiting what they're able to do but it's not necessarily because their own boards are like the—they're not peak capitalists, right, they might be benefiting from it but they're not the ones in charge of that system and foundations are heads of the financial sector, their boards are often not announced, not known, because it would be a liability. They have no shareholders, they have no consumers, they have funding whether or not their public image is strong so I see them as, um, when I think about a structural analysis of social justice movement, I'm thinking of them as the unnamed behind the scenes driver of inequity in that movement.

O'Brien: And you're referencing foundations?

Young: Mhmm.

O'Brien: Any—

Young: Any particular ones? [laughter]

O'Brien: No, no but I mean like how, like, there's a small number of foundations that people talk about a lot, the Ford Foundation, OSI [Open Society Institute] and then we have some vague sense that there are major donors who set up foundations just with their personal fortune or family foundations. Uh, what are the foundations that don't—what sort of foundations don't publicize their Boards or are sort of playing a role—

Young: Most big foundations have secret boards.

O'Brien: Wow.

Young: Yeah, it can be very hard to figure out whose on the Boards of most foundations, especially at the higher levels of grantmaking.

O'Brien: And the—that's very interesting.

Young: It's a very—there's more oversight and transparency required of corporations than there are of foundations—for foundations, yeah.

O'Brien: Wow.

Young: And by and large—and I said this once, I think I said this at our 20th anniversary event, where there was a photo that had gone viral right before I gave the speech where all of these older white men in suits applauding, um, the removal of the AC—some kind of, you know, executive order around the ACA [Affordable Care Act] removal and there was all of this scrutiny of, like—well, it was all these white, straight men that are older in suits taking away reproductive rights and healthcare and all these things—and when I looked at it I was like, this could just as easily be a Ford Foundation Board meeting. Like, I believe every single member of the Ford Foundation is white. I think that's very typical of most foundations; often it'll be a very, very rich billionaire, his wife, and a buddy in the financial sector, and that will be the Board. So there are no laws, really, whereas nonprofits have lots of different laws around how they can spend their funds, they have laws around transparency with their Board, they have to publicize different things, [Form] 990s, or visible corporations have to do similar things, um, there's some, in theory, accountability with stakeholders and people who are shareholders or whatever. If you're going to benefit from being a public entity there's certain laws around public transparency, whereas philanthropy, not only are there no laws, but they're also not paying taxes and not putting into this public system and they have to, in theory— like, to keep that tax status they need to work on behalf of public good but there's actually no requirements around—there's no standard by which there is public oversight. They just say that they're doing good and that's about it. Um, yeah, there's also—there's so many things I could say about, like, a critique of philanthropy but I'll just kind of [laughter] leave it there and say there's plenty of gap that Third Wave is trying to fill when it comes to social justice grantmaking. Um, so that's all to say we have a rapid response fund, called the “Mobilize Power Fund”. We have a program called the grow power fund, which gives six-year grants away to emerging groups that are new and or tiny and or haven't gotten a foundation grant or a national one. Um, and we see this as kind of trying to look at the conundrum of funders only wanting to establish—wanting to fund established things, but you can't get established until you get funding, right, so there's like a catch-22 and the people that exist in that catch-22 are the people who need funding the most. And so that's what that fund is about, it's like—okay well, how long does it really take for people most impacted by an issue to establish an organization and to develop it out and to build to that next level of growth—and we really saw that it actually takes a minimum of six years and no less than that. Unless, you happen to be right square in the middle of a venn diagram of all of the trends in philanthropy, maybe then you can, kind of, leap frog a little bit in terms of development but by and large if your issue doesn't become sexy and your region doesn't become sexy and you're just literally doing the work you need to do to survive in, like, Arizona or—where do we have grantees—in like, El Paso and North Carolina, whatever! Um, you know, it's grueling so that six year grant includes each year funding for capacity buildings that organizations decide on their own how they want to use it, it can roll over year-to-year for whenever they're ready so it just keeps snowballing and getting bigger and if they want to do a big project in the middle, which is often how long it takes for a group to figure out what capacity building means for them, then they have a big chunk of change they can put towards organizational development work. And then they have funding each year for a third party coach so that they're not leaning on their funder for coaching, even though they can. Like, we've realized that we're in a—it's a complicated dynamic so they get to hire—

O'Brien: Very weird—

Young: Yeah, very weird! So we get—they get to hire a group—a person or an organization to see them through and we're kind of calling it, unofficially, a "grant doula", like, somebody who's there to be like—this is a big deal, this kind of grant is, like, once in a—once in your lifetime kind of grant and it can be leveraged to take you to a very different place at the end or you can just keep using the funding and then it stops so there's lots of choices you can make over six years, slowly, slowly, slowly building towards something bigger, something more powerful. But, it's really hard to think that way and do those things when you're so in the weeds of the work and when you're really just trying to address, like, the day-to-day problems that people are having and are just very buried in what you're doing. So, that person is meant to be on the outside helping them think strategically and long term. Um, and then the third is called the "Own Our Power" fund and that's about really looking at what it takes to be community led and led by people most impacted by oppression. It has funding, not just to be led, but to own the work and decide the work and shape the work that the community needs versus the philanthropic conditions that are out there so it is kind of a philanthropic industrial complex kind of fund, and really it's one- to two-year grants, funding community—funding members becoming Executive Directors of the organization, like, trying to address that there is so much reward for bringing someone from the outside in, someone very highly educated, someone who has ties to philanthropy, and so often groups are in a bind, like—do we bring someone from our membership in who has really been an emerging leader or do we try and do a power move and bring someone in from the outside who can right away appeal to foundations in their language, you know?—and so this is a fund specifically to support groups who have made that other decision to fund a member. When we know a lot of foundations pull away, they stop giving grants, this is meant to give them a cushion and give them that kind of transition we know grassroots groups don't really get for their new leader. So, it funds that work, it funds financial sustainability, like, looking at how these community-led groups are just expected to be sustainable without actually any funders putting down for that, and really recognizing that that's a capacity building need and a need that requires training and time. Um, and then the final one is about narrative power, making sure groups that have this funding, that are community led rather, have access to participatory action research projects, strategic communications, and the ability to not have their work co-opted, so they have the power to name what they did, promote what they're doing, and actually have reach. We've seen this a lot where in these movement moments, quote unquote, like, when the work is sexy, the groups that are actually doing the most work are not recognized for that and they don't benefit from the attention. Major donors try to Google—who's doing this?—and if you don't have good analytics and if you don't have reach in terms of telling your story you don't get the money. So that's a lot of what we're focusing on with that fund is like, making sure that grassroots work doesn't get hijacked by foundations, by outsiders, by other more equipped, larger nonprofits.

O'Brien: I—um, as you're talking about this what's coming to mind for me is the tension between when people are doing organizing without any funding versus people whose—who they're, like these professional infrastructures of people doing organizing work and part of the critique of

nonprofits is trying to draw attention to historical movement that supposedly didn't rely on outside funding as much, that, like, either were self-funded or volunteer driven or other things. Um, so I'm not exactly sure what my question is, but to what extent would you say there's a—are you guys supporting people that come—we have ten minutes?

Young: Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. What extent are you talking about people who are very actively doing organizing with no funding, to what extent are you talking about people who have an idea and vision but then they're pitching it to funders, and to what extent is it a world of organizations out there that you guys are one component of keeping them alive?

Young: Mhmm.

O'Brien: Does that make sense?

Young: Yeah, that makes sense. Um, so, well, when you asked this question one of the things that came to mind was an anecdote I gave at a Funders Concerned about AIDS conference. I was recently on a plenary there and a guy heard all these things I was saying and he was like—yeah, yeah, yeah but what about sustainability, we don't allow ourselves as a foundation to fund work that we don't consider sustainable—and I said—well, you're looking at sustainability purely from an institutional perspective and not from a movement building perspective and when you're looking at it from a movement building perspective I might look at Young Women's Empowerment Project and the resilience of that campaign post-nonprofit as actually the most sustainable work there is and you might see that as evidence that they were not sustainable.

O'Brien: Because they—

Young: But it depends what you're judging it by—

O'Brien: They did it without funding.

Young: Yeah! And I think that the model and the structure is not what we look at, we look at how many people believe in what you're doing...right? And what form it takes we care, like, kind of, in the sense that we want to know that you're thinking about it and you're making informed decisions about it but we don't scrutinize or judge that model or that choice and we try to not be one of those funders who tries to drive organizations into (c)(3) nonprofit work because it didn't work for us, right? Like, our survival was tied to getting rid of our (c)(3) and actually thinking, well, what model allows us the most flexibility and allows us to do our work to the fullest of our ability and with the most integrity towards, like, what we mean about these words that we're saying about social justice and all these things. So, yeah, I think that—I don't know if that answers your question but, for example, when we ask questions about our potential grantees we might fund it might sound really, really good on paper and they might have all of the tools they might need to do some of this programming but if we go and visit it and it feels like it's just kind of somebody

who baked up an idea in grad school, they came out of grad school, they had some access to funding or they did some kind of kickstarter or something and they got the kind of money they needed from whatever means, like, invisibilized, you know, wealth, they are maybe doing some good work quote unquote but we don't see that as movement building per se, we're looking at like—you and who?—you know what I mean? Like, individual people do not just pool their power and resources and access and create a structure and then expect that that structure is going to be doing movement building, right? That's just not how it works and so what we look for is—how did people come together and create an idea that they're advancing collectively?—and then they might have chosen a model to do it under but that's beside the point. And so I think it is a kind of, like, different orientation around how we understand what the source of power is and I think that for a lot of folks that we fund they're using the nonprofit structure as a tool for community empowerment but they're not seeing that as the goal and they're not seeing that model as, like, the start and end of the work. And yeah, and it is attention, it is kind of confusing when you actually see it break down and you see certain groups get really large and start to absorb big foundation dollars and yeah, a lot of complicated things happen in that space but I think what we try to do is set groups up to where they can scale up and stay politically where they want to be in that early formation period and I think there's very few funders who are trying to be there at that point and time to say, um—we're trying to make it so that the only paradigm that exists isn't scaling up and moving to the center.

O'Brien: Right.

Young: And I think that that's all we're trying to accomplish and scale could look like a nonprofit but it could also look like something that's not a nonprofit and we try to make that clear to groups, we don't hold one standard of success and actually success should be defined by your community and not your funder.

O'Brien: So is a last question, where do you see trans movements, trans organizing, particularly by trans folks of color that have the kind of groups that you fund going in the coming years?

Young: Um—oh god we haven't even talked about this [Trump] Administration yet but when you asked that question it just came crashing down [laughter]. Um, like—yeah this is great and holy hell we're, I think, fighting—I think we're having to hold on—people who don't believe in civil rights as a strategy are holding on for dear life to the kinds of civil rights protections that still remain somewhat in place and I think that trans communities are being used as a foil for attempts to completely undermine all of civil rights in the country. And I think that that's really real, I think it's happening around employment protections and healthcare and I think that the idea of—trans people are too expensive for the state to employ or pay for and the military—like, that kind of thing feels like the same as the kinds of ideologies behind pre-existing conditions and the kinds of ways that disabled folks are being completely written out of mainstream laws and healthcare policies, the way that women's bodies are seen as somewhat extra, or just expensive, and the centering of cis, straight, white manhood as the only body that is considered universal and part of a protected class, I think that trans existence and the existence of trans people of color, trans women of color, disabled trans people, like, are really kind of at the crosshairs of those attempts

by this administration and are making really clear choices about not limiting ourselves to civil rights and kind of the existing political frameworks that haven't actually served them to begin with. And so I think that we're in this kind of complicated situation where we're needing to fight for antiquated kinds of political rights and create kinds of institutions and models that can build beyond that, and I think that's where we've always been, everyone's been struggling with that, but I think this Administration brings it to a head and puts trans people in the center of it without our consent, but still we're in the center of it and I think we're having to look at our progressive and cisgender people on the left and saying—you see how much Republicans and conservatives are obsessed with us and our bodies? Maybe y'all need to recognize that there's something really important here that we raise about our culture and about our economy and about our political life—and I think that that's—feels like what the future is about for me, as far as I see it.

O'Brien: Great, thank you so much, Rye!

Young: Thank you! This was a pleasure, it was really fun to get into the thick of it with you and kind of go down memory lane!