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**Interview with Neha Guatam**  
**Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu**

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: All right, so I have this conversation -- identification questions first, then I'm going to ask kind of more about your background (inaudible) like, growing up, stuff like that, then more specific Questions about CUNY student activism stuff, and then your past after. Okay. Could you state your name, just for clar-- you know (inaudible)

Neha Guatam: My name is Neha Guatam.

Amaka: And how old are you?

Neha: I am 32 years old?.

Amaka: And how do you racially identify?

Neha: (inaudible) South Asian (inaudible).

Amaka: And how do you identify your gender?

Neha: Female (inaudible).

Amaka: And how do you identify your sexual orientation? You can also skip questions if you don't mind? --

Neha: I identify as queer.

Amaka: Okay. And your marital status --

Neha: Single.

Amaka: -- [and then?] -- yeah, [so then?] --

Neha: No children.

Amaka: Okay. So, where were you born and raised?

Neha: I'm an immigrant. I was born in India. I then -- I lived in a bunch of places. I lived in Ethiopia for a while, with family, and I was in Alaska until I was about 13. My family is working class, and my mother and father divorced when I was young. So, I have -- I've gone in between their families pretty often, moved a lot. And then I moved -- my mother was always in Europe, so I moved back to New York when I was 13, and I've lived in New York since I was 13.

Amaka: Okay. Can you describe -- [and?] you moved around a lot, so you can choose to describe what, you know, [what point?], but, like, [can you?] describe, like, the neighborhood which you grew up in -- [I mean, which?] you grew up in, you know, culturally, class, [all these?] (inaudible)

Neha: Yeah. So, I'll talk about New York, because that's probably like shaped me the most. But I grew up in Queens, Woodside and Jackson Heights. And it's one of the most diverse ZIP codes in the world. Very strong immigrant community, working class community. My neighborhood is predominantly Latino, Korean, South Asian, Bengali. Most people are -- (inaudible) foreign languages as their first language. But I spoke English with my mother. I took the train all the time, everywhere. My mother eventually, like, bought a house, as I got older, but I [mean?], I very much identified as a working-class immigrant (inaudible) you know, kind of, like -- grew up with her having issues with, like, dealing with bureaucracies and not being able to communicate and, like, express yourself fully, and having to, like, translate for her or do things for her, fill out paperwork, like, you know, things -- I, like, assimilated faster than her. Like, I realize (inaudible) I was, like -- my mom relied on me a lot to -- because she [was a minority, had problems with?], like, official (inaudible). But I [went to Brooklyn Tech?] for a few years and had a lot of issues there. Just, like, really stressed out. Like, I felt like I had a lot of expectations to do really well, but I was coming from a working-class family, didn't really have that support. I was really stressed out, so (inaudible) you know, not really caring, like, about my education so much. Wasn't politicized at all. And I got in trouble a bit, was kicked out of my house, and I moved to Seattle [at 16?]. My mom caught me with with -- [storing?], like, drugs in the, you know, freezer [and the?] -- so, you know, was going back and forth, having a hard time with my education, and I got left back. Didn't really trust schools (inaudible).

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: So, I came back to New York after a year of trying to live in Seattle with my dad, and then [went to my summer?] school, went to public high school in the -- Queens. Went to Bryant High School, and just decided I was going to finish up my high school -- get my high school diploma and figure it out, and it wasn't, like, the end of my life yet. So, graduated [00:05:00] late and didn't really have any help, like, you know, with applying to college. None of my family had been to college. So, I applied to the only school that my friends were applying to, which was LaGuardia Community College. So, I also didn't know what I wanted to do, so I just applied for a liberal arts program. And then, I got to LaGuardia, I kind of -- I had an English class with a professor who kind of recruited me to coordinate she was the coordinator of the women's center at LaGuardia Community College, so she needed a student to help her coordinate activities. So, I started helping her and throwing events at, I don't know, the women's center, and then I got involved in kind of gender issues. And, at first, it was just, like, this thing I'd get extra credit for it. And then I -- I became politicized through that, and then while I was, like, at LaGuardia, I found out about SLAM!. I think someone from SLAM! team to do, like, [class rounds?] about stuff that was going on [in CUNY, and that's?] -- then -- so, I -- [that was?] kind of, like, on my radar, and I heard, like, all the -- about all the radical things that they were doing, and their politics. So, I was really interested. And then later on, I think the next following year, someone -- his name was Slab.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: You know Slab?

Amaka: Right.

Neha: Slab had come to the women's center, 'cause he saw some, like, posters of radical women up somewhere and he just, like, "Oh, do you know about SLAM!? SLAM! at Hunter is doing -- kind of like a radical action retreat to, like, train people for action." So, I think there was something coming up. So, it was, like, a week-long kind of intense action -- I don't know if it's called workshop or training. And so, a friend of mine at the women's center was

interested in going, so I attended that at Hunter College. At that time, Hunter College SLAM! was in August. And so, you know, they had their own space.

Amaka: What year was the -- what year was this?

Neha: This was in -- 2002.

Amaka: Okay, [right?].

Neha: And so, I had -- at the training -- there's?] a bunch of folks --John--

Amaka: John Kim

Neha: John Kuhn, I'm not sure if he was there. Was another John, who's Irish. John McMann, I think his name was. Sabrina.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: And Suzanne. And, you know, kind of the O.G.s --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- of SLAM! and, you know, I -- I mean, I had been doing --- throwing events with students at LaGuardia. But just, like, the level of knowledge that they had about resistance and things at CUNY, I was just kind of blown away by how organized they were, and just, like, how much control they had of the space. Like, you know, that they -- that they had -- like, they had access to so many rooms and I was just, like, oh my God! (laughter) These people are running stuff over here, you know, they're amazing. And it was just so comforting that they -- they were holding down, and it was very, like, you know, women-led and women of color-led, and I -- blown away by that, too. And the training was awesome, too. And I -- I left -- you know, I had a really good impression from -- from that, and it was like a -- it was [a few days?] so, I think I -- that I -- that (inaudible) week too. Who else? This other gentleman who lives in (inaudible) [huge?] -- Joe, I think his name is?

Amaka: [England?] or --

Neha: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: Was there, and, you know, and I -- I realized that not everyone -- everybody, you know, had radical politics but not the exact same politics, you know? People identified as Marxist and --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- not and -- but they were some kind of, like, diversity women --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- which I liked, as well. And I just remember a lot of -- a lot of the activities, even, that we did during the workshops. And, you know, they -- they showed, like, multimedia and, you know, had us talk about it, and --

Amaka: What was it -- like, you said it's like a retreat or, [like, about?] --

Neha: It was like a -- an [00:10:00] action camp, like a radical action camp. Like, just how to prepare for being involved in actions, whether they be, like, sit-ins, takeovers, like, what to do. Peaceful protest, like -- and just, like, yeah, understanding (inaudible) struggle and, like (inaudible) tactics, like, radical, you know, strategy. Yeah, and also just going over history of (inaudible) stuff. I remember there was just, like, a history of CUNY workshop and --

you know, which -- making sure everybody knew, like, how many schools there were, where -- where are they? Who goes to these schools?

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: Just kind of the demographics of CUNY and, like, what -- how important CUNY was historically for, you know, as a public institution for people of color. And so, after that, I -- I -- I did some things that summer, and I found out more about CUNY because I did a -- a workshop in Vassar College, and one of our books that we read for, like, a revolutionary literature class was Assata Shakur's biography. And so, I knew that Assata Shakur, like, went to City College for a while, and everybody was telling me that, like, City College had, like, a good history program, and they were -- there was, like, a -- an Asian studies and a black studies and, Latino studies, and I just knew that it had, like, this interesting history, also, and so -- you know, and more intentionally applied to City College, like, wanting to be a part of that culture, like, wanting to have access to that. And I remember coming to, like, orientation, and I walked -- someone had told me -- that was a part of the SLAM! told me that they were starting a SLAM! chapter at City and that I should look for them. And the day that I went to orientation -- I hadn't even started classes yet. They were, like, "Look for the door with a fist on it." So, I walked into the building and I noticed a -- a room with, you know, flyers and it -- I read it -- the title, and I was, like -- it said Assata Shakur/Guillermo Morales Center, and I was just, like, I got to go in here. And I started asking them about SLAM! and they were, like, "Yeah, we're -- you know, we recently started meeting," and I was all about it, and gave them my number. And I think [Hank?], called me like, a week later and was, like, "Yeah, we're -- you know, we're formally meeting as soon as school starts." So, I -- I went to the meeting and, you know, no one had known anything about me, so I think they were a little curious as to why I was there, 'cause I was just, like, "I know about you guys and I'm ready to work. Like, put me to work." And I think, at first, they were a little, like, "Let's -- let's find out about you," 'cause I feel like -- I know at Hunter, there was, like, a little bit of a process in terms of screening people and making sure, like, you know, that nobody was there under a, you know, other intention, you know, because they had had experiences. Not being, like, infiltrated, but, like, you know, worrying about something happening. So, but, you know, for me, there was -- you know, there was no process that I had to go through, but I think basically they wanted to make sure that you were there for the right reasons. But, you know, I -- I'd been really involved at City -- at LaGuardia, so I came there, like, really enthusiastic to be a part of SLAM!, and just knowing about them for so long. So, I was just, like, "Can I take minutes?" Like -- they're, like, "Yeah, take the minutes, like, do whatever you want." I was just ready to -- to do a lot of work, and I think they -- they just tossed it back.

Amaka: Right.

Neha: And I -- and I showed up, like, you know, which was -- I think they and we all, like, just connected off the bat. I spent a lot of time at the student center, in the Assata Shakur/Guillermo Morales Center, because it wasn't -- that was the only, like, safe space I knew of where I identified with the, you know, people and their -- and their values and politics.

Amaka: Let me back up for a minute.

Neha: Yeah.

Amaka: So, you mentioned before that you weren't politicized when you were, like, in high school or, like, you were a teenager. Were -- did you grow up in a political household at all? Were your parents involved in politics at all, whether it --

Neha: So, I -- I mean, I think that my -- the things that my parents did were inherently political, and -- but I did not grow up with -- in a political household at all. Like, my mom -- I think I -- I -- I believe that my mom is feminist, [00:15:00] but I don't think she knows what that means, you know?

Amaka: (laughs) Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Neha: My mom left India and basically kidnapped me to get away from my father. So, you know, she understands what oppression is, and came here to get an education, because she married my father and was expected to, you

know, stop going to school and stop working, and her family was more liberal and his family wasn't. So, she wanted to get away from that, but, you know, I -- I -- I think that, for her, like, you know, education was a privilege that she didn't have access to, so I -- and I know that it was a big deal for her to get an education, but she just never had the opportunity. So, you know, there's a lot of expectation for me, you know, being not even first generation, but immigrant to --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- to help, you know, prove that we could -- we could be okay. So, I just felt a lot of that -- being here at -- you know, my family -- my mother didn't finish college, my father didn't finish college, so -- but, you know, they had -- they also didn't know how to navigate college, like, you know --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- for them, you get an education 'cause it helps you with surviving, and it's not -- you know, like, studying liberal arts or the arts or history or something [that?] -- for your own intellectual, academic need is not even a concept they understand. They're, like, you know, get -- get an education to get a degree so you can get paid.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: So, you know, it was hard to -- to go to school and tell them that I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I was really interested in all these things, and I just wanted to study all of them. They -- I think they're very confused about how it was going to get me a job. So I very conflicted, 'cause I was going to school, but I was also working one or two nighttime jobs. You know, didn't have a lot of help from them, and when I was finishing up at LaGuardia, I had a college counselor that was trying to get me to -- you know, they were -- a lot of them were, like, "Oh, you're -- you're great, you're so bright. Like, you should get out of CUNY and go to a private university." And, you know, I kind of felt like I internalized a lot of that kind of racist -- especially being Asian, like, you know, 'cause they're, like, "You're Indian," you know, without understanding class, like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- you know, like me being expected to -- because of the model minority myth, just to be at a better school without really understanding how and, you know, why. But I had -- my college counselor tried to help me get into Barnard. But, you know, she was a new counselor and I -- I had so much -- I -- I thought -- was, like, yeah, you know, I -- for -- for a while, was, like, yeah, maybe I need to get out of CUNY. I feel like some of my classes are really not challenging and I don't -- I don't fit into the student body. You know, like, I feel like I'm a little bit of a level above this, you know, this organization. So, I applied for Barnard and I gave -- you know, this woman was the only woman helping me. I had -- clearly was, like, putting all my trust in her, 'cause I didn't have anyone else and she, like, didn't check the admission date, so --

Amaka: Oh, no.

Neha: -- like, it -- my application went in -- like, she -- it went in, like, a few days late and they didn't accept it, and I remember just, like, crying and bawling, and -- but then, I was, like -- I realized that it, you know -- you know, it's okay, like, I'm still going to get my education. But I -- I -- I felt like -- for a while, there was -- times where I was, like, I need to get the -- the hell out of CUNY and, you know, I'm too good for this place and -- just, like, everything, this whole system is not helping me, and I belong somewhere better. But, you know, in the end, I -- I was -- right now, you know, when I look back at it, I'm -- I would not be the person that I am without, you know, going to -- through the program that I did and meeting the people I did. And, you know, I work with youth now and I work in a public school and I -- I feel like I'm -- I'm really happy that I went there, but I definitely internalized a lot of things. You know, expectations about getting an education somewhere else and getting a good education and a quality education. But my -- you know, my family, they were still excited that I was taking --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- my education seriously. It took me eight years to get my bachelor's. Seven, eight years. I dropped out for a year and, you know, I worked and I paid for a lot of it, so -- but it was -- it was a big deal to me. I don't think it was really [00:20:00] a big deal to them. It's complicated. My father was never around. My mother didn't go to my graduation, just 'cause -- I think deep down inside, she kind of was resenting that I was able to have the privilege that she didn't -- so, it -- it's just a very American thing to, like, to understand how much, you know, a -- a ceremony means or --

Amaka: Oh, yeah.

Neha: Yeah. So, I -- it was a very personal thing to -- to kind of make sense of what I was doing at CUNY, because yeah, my family didn't understand any of it --

Amaka: Can you --

Neha: -- [to talk about it?].

Amaka: Can you speak to -- will you talk about, you know, LaGuardia being, I think you said an English class that really politicized you? Can you speak more specifically to, like, what it -- you know, what that process was and kind of --

Neha: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: So, my professor at that time, she was openly out, she was queer or gay. She had a partner, you know, that she -- that she had written a lot about LGBTAmaka rights and HIV, and a lot of her family members had -- she had lost some of her family members to AIDS, so, you know, she's a very interesting woman. And she -- I was really engaged in her class, and she brought up issues of the family and race and class, and I -- it was the first time -- I remember she showed Mississippi Masala in class and I was just, like, this is my life! Like, (laughter) you are showing my life right now! Like -- and just being taught, and me being, like, so -- I just wanted to talk about that stuff all the time. I think it was, like, the first time, you know, where I put these kind of things in context and saw myself in them. And so, I think she was, like -- she saw that I was really, really engaged in it. And so, she kind of recruited me really, you know, to be involved in the women's center, and I was -- I was glad to be -- I -- at first, I didn't really know what it would entail. She was just, like, "Come to an event," and there were, like, ten people there. It was just very, very small and intimate. But then, I realized there was a whole vacuum of -- there was nobody doing anything. Like, there was this amazing space and, you know, she had a grant, and there were no students, like, helping her throw events and there was clearly, like, a need. But no one was taking it on, and I was -- you know, she said, "I actually need help." And so, we would -- I think we (inaudible) at first, I wanted to find out what the student body kind of needed and wanted from that space. So, she -- she told me, like, "You know, whenever we have a -- an event about domestic violence, there are people, like, through (inaudible) clear to the back, like, overflowing, and they need, like, resources and, you know, because they don't have that space here. And they come, and someone -- someone will go stay and ask you for resources personally, because they're in a situation they can't get out of." And I was just, like, so overwhelmed that, you know, like there were so many women going through so many things that weren't getting the help and support they needed. So, we did a bunch of events. We did -- lot of events around gender and, like, women in comics, women in hip-hop, and we had amazing guest speakers. She had a lot of connections and resources that she helped me plug into. So, she would just be, like, "This is this person's email, set this event up, and I will, you know, train you how to do the paperwork." So, we always confirm it, the -- you know, we had the grants for -- we had food and flyers and we did the whole shebang. And so, you know, I would recruit my friends to help with events, and it became, like, I had [a key?] and I had access to the space and I could basically could do whatever we want. You know, there were some events that were -- I just remember people coming and feeling really, really good at the conversations and having that space to have these conversations, and me also learning at the same time. And I remember we had open mics. I remember I did an open mic, and I, you know, started writing, and was interested in spoken word at that time, and wrote, you know, about my experiences of, like, trying to get an education. And I remember, like, inviting my mom to one of the open [00:25:00] mics. And, you know, my -- my professor was there, and I just remember it being, like, so much and getting so into it that I was, like, crying and like, reading this thing and -- and, you know, I felt really vulnerable and

really good, and healing in this space. So, yeah, it was powerful just to go through this, and I knew that, like, that was it. Like, you know, I'm -- I'm going to start this process that's going to help me understand that I'm not (inaudible) when you become politicized, it's, like, you realize you [put your struggle in the -- in a?] larger context. So, you know, you are not struggling alone. There's other people that you see struggling and -- under the same systems of oppression. So it's just less alienating, and then you find, like, you know, your political family, and it was just a new way of thinking, but I really -- there was a lot of growing I had to do. It was just the beginning of everything that came out after it. So I'm really thankful to have gone through that process, and then -- because wouldn't have] sought out SLAM! if I didn't have -- you know, go with that.

Amaka: Can you describe the political climate, I guess from the time in which you were -- I guess LaGuardia, too, but really when you were in City College, the years that you were there, can you just describe the political climate of New York?

Neha: So, that was post-September 11th. Giuliani was mayor, and for me, being South Asian, like, I just, you know, had a very particular experience, because I felt a lot of backlash within my community and, you know, my mom would say things like "I can't wear this outfit, 'cause, you know I'm hearing that like, you know, South Asians are being, like, targeted at the airport, and this -- and they're getting beaten." I really just couldn't make sense of it, because -- but I, you know, was a history major and I understood that -- what was going on, and -- but it was just really hard to process. And, the same time, you know, it's very much the same issues that happen now, like, black and Latino communities being criminalized, like -- and just understanding that we're all being, you know, we're all being criminalized or, like, not having the access to things, and not being really understood. I remember we -- you know, my family at that time was really worried about our safety, because post-September 11, like, some of our neighbors had complained, like, had called some office and we had someone come to our house and asked about our -- our, like, citizenship, and we had to show -- [it was actually -- I think it was?] probably, like -- I wasn't home at this time, but she said, like, people -- I don't know if it was the FBI or someone asked about our status. She had to show our passports to them.

Amaka: Was this in Queens, still?

Neha: [This was in Queens, yeah. I mean, you know, like, our neighbors were all different and, you know, my -- my mom's boyfriend was Pakistani and, you know, had a long beard and --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: (inaudible)

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: And, you know, it's just that culture, you know, and we're about to go to war, like, with Afghanistan, and just people being ignorant. And just feeling really, like, not trusting of anyone and, you know, just having to also defend myself. And, you know, I was very anti-war, and, you know, having to argue with people about how -- what I thought, and so, you know, I felt like the city was very divided and -- you know, especially right after it happened. Lot of reactionary --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- and just a culture in the police complete police state, like, there's a lot of security, a lot of fear. And, you know, no one would -- not really feeling like you had the luxury to just not think about these things. And it was just rough, too, you know? And, you know, I was working, and I -- I was working downtown, in SoHo (inaudible) like, our (inaudible) like, not as much -- we weren't getting paid as much. And so, it took a while to get used to everything. But, you know, I remember being a part of (inaudible) -- I mean, some of the things that you focused on in SLAM! were around just similar things to -- I mean, studied, like, the Young Lords, [00:30:00] and what community members did to support their community. And, like, it -- we engaged and helped our community, whether we do, like -- I remember we did a soup kitchen one day on the rotunda -- or not on the rotunda, but on the same -- outside the -- NAC building, on the third -- where the entrance is for the third floor. And just really understanding that, like, people were trying to -- struggling to survive, and, you know -- you know, when we were

going to CUNY, like, books are just expensive and, you know, a lot of (inaudible) really, really feel it each semester after we had to pay -- we could hardly, like, get everything else and -- so, the book x-change was just, like, I thought was the most brilliant thing, where we organized -- you know, instead of getting your books from the bookstore, we would help students -- and we wouldn't buy their books. We would --

Amaka: Right

Neha: -- help them sell it, and then we would take a small piece just to keep us running. But there's -- I mean, there were times when we would get so busy that we'd be, like, oh, we need -- clearly need, like, a whole -- whole automated, like, setup, but we don't have it. People would be, like, "Well, why don't you" -- you know, "why aren't there more people working?" And we're, like, "We're student run. Like, we just did this 'cause it -- we thought this was important." They were, like, "Whoa, you know, you're not working as a separate" -- and we're, like, "No, we don't get money to do this. Like, we just think it's important." And, you know, but then, when they would find out about it -- I think a lot of people would become engaged with the space through the book x-change. Because people were just, like, "I need books." And then, they're, like, "Oh, you guys are doing this on your own." And, you know, it's very liberating, and you have a sense of, you know, independence and, that we can kind of take care of our own without relying on -- on the school. And it was just a -- a really amazing feeling, 'cause that [helped -- the space?] was so -- at the beginning of every semester, it was a hustling, bustling space where everybody could get their books and, you know, they were realizing that they were getting ripped off by the school, and --

Amaka: So, how did it work? What were the mechanics for, like, the book x-change?

Neha: So, like, it -- the book x-change was named after Malcolm X, the book x-change. There was, like, no E in our "x-change." And our whole thing was that the -- this -- the school would buy books and they'd sell it for a -- a disproportionately, like, higher prices, it -- than what they paid for, you know, your book, your used book. And they would keep the profit. And so, we were -- we let students -- basically, we -- we had all the books on a list, and students would look for their book and they'd check it out, check the condition, and when we bought, the -- the seller could name their price. So, you know, how bad do they want to sell it? They wanted a lower price, then they took -- they were able to take five dollars, they took five dollars. And if they wanted -- was a textbook and they wanted -- you know, they paid \$100 and they would take 50 and someone wanted to buy it for 50 because the bookstore was selling it for 80 -- they could do that, and we only kept, like -- it depended -- the amount that we kept was based on the price of book. So, it was, like, 50 cents every \$10 just to keep our -- the space going and to have materials for the book x-change. So, there was just the -- you know, a long list that we updated, like, daily. And I mean, if we sold a book, we would cross them out. So, essentially like a library, but you would be able to buy books and you would allow sellers -- and then, after we sold a book, we would contact the -- we would just tell them to check back or we'd contact the seller to say, "You can collect your money" and people would come and get their money, and they'd just be like, (inaudible) you know, they would buy more books with that money, and it was just awesome. They were so blown away by it. You know, we -- after a while, we had, like, like professors sending students there, and everybody knew about it. And --

Amaka: So, people could both buy and sell -- or, yeah, buy and sell their books (inaudible).

Neha: Yeah, buy and sell their books. And --

Amaka: And you ran -- was it run out of the Shakur (inaudible)?

Neha: Yeah, it was run out of the center. So, we did that every semester. That was, like, a -- like, a big kind of initiative. We also did -- also, because we got people familiar with the space, so people would come into the space, they'd be, like, "What is this space?" And then you would tell them about the history of the space and it was, like, just a great way to get people to -- you know, interested in events. And I remember, I recruited a few people by having them help volunteer for the book x-change, and then -- and still you know, friends and in touch with them now, and -- yeah.

Amaka: How long did that go -- the book [00:35:00] x-change go on for?

Neha: Years, and every year it -- it got bigger and bigger. [But Rudolfo?] -- it was -- [it was Rufolfo and I think Hank's?] initiative to begin with, and we just kept it going about three or four years.

Amaka: And I guess, since we're on that topic, what were some other activities [at the center?]?

Neha: We were always doing things, like, you know, we had meetings regularly. We had weekly meetings. So, you know, it really depended on who was a part of SLAM! at that time, and -- where our priorities lie, you know, for us.

Amaka: Right.

Neha: We had our ten points, you know, our ten demands. But, you know, when we were more -- I remember when we started recruiting more people, and we had a lot of Latina and predominately, like, Dominican women at SLAM!, a lot of us were more concerned about, like, immigrants' rights and justice, and so we went to a an immigrants' rights march. But we definitely did a lot of awareness around just CUNY history. we did a lot of workshops on CUNY history for the CUNY student body. We had the book x-change. We were involved in a lot of actions, we were -- we wanted to do a lot of stuff around the RNC when it came to New York. So, we had this huge contingent with some folks (inaudible) people of color contingent at the RNC demonstration, and we had a huge banner. It was this epic banner that said, "More money for education, no to war." And we just got a lot of, like, press with that. And --

Amaka: Didn't they just settle, like, yesterday or today, the city?

Neha: The city?

Amaka: Yeah, [just?] --

Neha: Around the RNC stuff?

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: Wow.

Amaka: I saw a headline in, like New York Times (inaudible) --

Neha: I didn't hear about that. That's crazy.

Amaka: -- about the arrests and stuff like that.

Neha: Yeah. It was -- that was a really intense day. But we also did -- we had -- we wanted to do something -- it never really -- we had one good semester of it, but we had this thing called the Free School or -- I'm forgetting the name of it, but it -- the whole concept was around popular education. So, we did a bunch of workshops for each other. We started reading about, you know, paulo freire kind of, like, the pedagogy around popular education and -- and how -- kind of understanding the -- even the -- the small kind of structures in the classroom dynamic, how much that affected our education, and that kind of changed things a lot for me, because then I was more critical in my classes of, you know, who was taking space of --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- exactly how the professor was talking to us and how we were sitting, and after -- because, you know, we all would sign up to lead different workshops, and basically, we would do the research and readings -- ourself, and then facilitate workshops for each other. And we would invite a lot of the -- you know, the school and the student body, but we would usually had, like, one or two extra people there, but, for the most part, the workshops were for us. But, you know, they were amazing in terms of the content and the quality of the workshops. And, you know, how -- we had, like, you know, how to, like, train the trainer and --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- how to be the facilitator and how to -- you know, all those things. Just how to be a good organizer and how to empower people and -- it's funny, 'cause I have, like, a whole photo album. So, like, when I look at the photos, I remember more. But we had a lot of discussions about gender, too. I know Hank did a workshop around hip-hop, which is great. But sometimes, [we -- we had a few?] -- we had clashes with gender dynamic in SLAM!, because as much as, you know, we wanted to be women-of-color-led, like, some -- you know, we would argue a lot, have little -- well, you know, as -- as any other organization, we were also friends, and people were --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- involved in relationships and going out and dating and having sex with each other. So things just got complicated when [00:40:00] people had their own personal drama and then they brought politics into it. It's -- you know, we had to check ourselves. So, it really affected us a lot in terms of --

Amaka: (inaudible)

Neha: It -- you know, we -- it made us constantly check our own personal, you know, relationships with each other and how people were treating each other. And then, there was a time where, you know, if someone -- if a -- if some people weren't getting along, we just felt that people weren't meeting and people weren't, you know, weren't interacting with each other, we'd have to take sides. I remember, we had a discussion about, like, the Young Lords, about how they -- we had a -- I know we had a long -- we had about a weekend or a long workshop around the history of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. And I remember, I think -- I'm not sure if I met David there, but there was a -- there was a good attendance. There was -- a lot of people from Hunter came to that, as well. (inaudible) the Young Lords wouldn't let the -- the organizers, like, date each other, 'cause they realized that it would just prevent the -- you know, there was so much drama that would happen that would prevent them from getting any really -- getting either -- intimate. And, you know, us considering that, that we shouldn't -- maybe we shouldn't allow ourselves to -- to get involved personally, because it really affects our organizing. But, yeah, we do a lot of -- a lot of education around that stuff. We tried to engage the student body around the history of CUNY. I remember we invited Rebel Diaz. Before Rebel Diaz was Rebel Diaz --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- and they, like, people knew them, they came and we did a big event in the rotunda. And they -- like, we had -- I forgot the name, [Laterre?]?

Amaka: Yeah, [Laterre?]?

Neha: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: She -- she, like, sang in the rotunda and everybody was, like, blown away, and was just a -- you know, you -- you can't, like, not be engaged in the rotunda, and everybody shows there. But [you would say?] -- we do a lot of tabling, you know, to -- to recruit, also. But sometimes we found that weird, because we just kind of like people with questionable politics are, you know -- people would come and we'd just be, like, yeah, maybe you should have -- be -- this open to, you know, participation, because we don't know where everybody's at --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- and, you know, when we're having a conversation about police brutality and someone comes that's new, and they're like, "My brother's a cop and I love the cops," and we're just, like -- (laughter) like -- and then, we thought that this one guy was a good kid, but, you know, like, just was not where we were at. And it was just, like, we kind of felt like he was there to flirt with girls, and I think we kind of had a -- an internal conversation about, "Do you think we should, you know, allow or engage certain types of people?" And I think he stopped coming, and whatever. But we weren't exclusive as much as Hunter was, but, you know, a lot of us had a lot of things going on,

too. We all had jobs, we all had classes. Sometimes, we were, like, oh -- where we always felt guilty for not doing enough. We were involved with Rod McGuire??? like (inaudible) you know, came a lot and talked about what he would do at City College and kind of -- I -- I remember always feeling bad, 'cause I always felt like we weren't doing enough. And, you know, he was engaged with a lot of things at other CUNY schools, and there was a case with -- I forgot his name. He was trying to get more classes in Spanish at Hostos was a big case around him. He got arrested for -- so, he would come -- you know, we were trying to collaborate with a lot of other CUNY schools to -- so, we would go to other CUNYs and support their -- their things. But there was a little tension between Hunter and us, [sort of?] --

Amaka: So, can you speak to that a little bit? (laughs)

Neha: Yeah, I mean, it's -- it's kind -- I don't really know the stories as much as [Rudolfo?] and --

Amaka: Hank.

Neha: -Hank. But, you know, to what I know is -- you know, some folks at Hunter SLAM! felt like we didn't go through the proper steps or channels to become an official chapter, and -- but -- and I just felt like that was kind of elitist. And, you know -- and [00:45:00] it's kind of questioning our leadership a lot. Like, oh, they're -- they're a bunch of guys, they're socialists and they're Marxists, and kind of felt like they were not supporting us, and kind of expected us to have this kind of fraternal relationship with them, and just didn't feel very supported. So, you know, they would have events and things and, you know, when they were -- and we were going to our stuff, too, so we wouldn't always feel the need to go to their stuff because we didn't -- we weren't engaged and felt like it was just an expectation, 'cause they were the O.G.s. And that was kind of an energy that we got, too, when they were around, like a very, like, patronizing kind of, you know, vibe. And so, I never felt -- you know, I -- I felt great in that space, but as that went on, I -- there were some people that were really cool that would come to City College. Like, Suzanne was cool, like, come to City College and be involved with stuff, and -- but there -- was just some people that were clearly, like, "Y'all are not real SLAM!" And so, you know, there was a lot of distrust, and I remember when there was, you know, stuff going down with their -- the election, where the administration (inaudible) felt like had rigged the electronic --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- rigged the election. They were really feeling it, and we were feeling it for them, too, but there was just little that we could do that we felt like we could do, and we were having our own stuff going on, you know, internally with the school. And so, I remember the day of the SLAM! 10 -- the 10-year anniversary, we decided to go to a -- immigrant rights march. And it was so funny, 'cause there were some -- there was a girl named Sydney. Syd, you know, was white, and was really involved in Hunter SLAM! and was, like, "Oh, you all -- you guys really need to get involved with SLAM! 10." But we were, like, "We don't engage with Hunter SLAM! that much. Like, we don't really understand why we need to throw this event with them. We'll go but, you know," -- we also -- there was, like, a march that day that we really wanted to go across the Brooklyn Bridge around immigrant justice. It was, like, [SV?]- I forgot the legislation.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Neha: Yeah. And so, we were, like, we want to go to that. And so, at first, when they found out that we weren't going to attend, there was just a lot of -- they were saying, "Oh, you guys are -- you know, you're not, like -- you should be here to take the knowledge and, you know, we're doing all this for you. And, like, you guys are ungrateful, and this is where you need to be." And, like -- we were, like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa." We're, like, "[You don't?]" -- you know, politically, like, we're -- this is -- feels important, too." And so, we went -- we decided to go there that day and then go to this SLAM! 10, and we could do both. And it was funny, 'cause one of -- I went with the other group, and I got to the SLAM! 10, and Sydney was already there, and the panel and, you know, everybody was in the audience, and they were talking about us. They're, like, "That's why our sisters are marching right now," like, you know, "defending the rights of our -- you know, the community that they think they belong to," and I was just, like, what? I thought, you know, you didn't want us here. I was like, "Oh, we're here, you guys." And they're, like, "Oh! It's great you guys went," and I just felt a little conflicted about how -- how supportive they were of us and how -- how real our relationship was between the chapters.

Amaka: (inaudible) do you think that it was a mixed feeling, or do you think that most people were dismissive of (inaudible)? Do you think that it was mixed? Like, there were some people that were cool, there were some people that were --

Neha: Yeah, there were -- there were some people that were supportive and they knew some of us personally and, you know, would come to things. But, you know, we were -- a lot of us were politicized very differently and younger, and newly politicized, and didn't have the language and, you know, and I -- just felt, like, really -- like, they were just really elitist and patronizing when we were around them, so we just didn't feel safe around them. A lot of us just, you know, feel like that, but some -- we -- me personally -- like, everybody had a different relationship with, you know, individuals separately. So, I thought, you know, Suzanne was cool, Daniel [Tsardin?], T-S-A-R -- A-R-D-I-N, he was really supportive. We would go -- we went to -- [Eric O'Dell?], he was really cool. He was at City, but I remember Daniel from -- from [00:50:00] Hunter, [Rudolfo?] and Eric and Hank were all really cool, and they went to an SDS conference in Chicago, like, when they -- SDS started up again, and I was the only woman that went with them. But, you know, sometimes -- but, like, oh, I'm the only woman here. But Daniel was really cool. And I think, you know, my politics were always evolving and changing, and sometimes it felt like it was a very, like, Marxist space. But also, I was very, like, critical of -- so, I mean, we would have conversations, but I felt like a lot of people were not open to, like, conversations about, you know, other kind of liberal ideologies. Like --

Amaka: So, there wasn't really PE around, like -- or political education around, like, Marxism or socialism or things like that?

Neha: There was, but definitely not, like -- not, like, another level above that, which would be, like, anti-imperialist, anti-state, like, you know -- you know, I think they would -- there was a lot of internal, like, arguing about how you lead and -- yeah, and so, I felt, like, it got -- it got a little messy when we had those conversations, 'cause for the most part, you know, we were critical -- we -- we understood how, you know, self-determination played out in through, like, the Black Panthers and freedom struggles and -- but it -- and Cuba, and so many things, but we -- but also, they didn't -- we didn't really talk about how problematic it was to have a very centralized, like, leadership and, you know, like, not -- we understood what top-down and --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- meant, but sometimes felt that, you know, people really had had different -- yeah, politics around what they felt was, you know, their revolutionary utopia or whatever, you know?

Amaka: So how would you describe SLAM! at City College, how was it described ideologically?

Neha: I mean, we -- we had a very particular analysis of the privatization of education, police state, and access, and also, you know, class and race stuff. But not -- I wouldn't say -- not so much -- but still, it felt, like v-- very hetero and a very hetero maintained space, and -- while some women were Queer, it's, like, you know -- just little things like Rudolfo would just get mad at us sometimes -- be, like, "Woman!" Da-da-da-da. We'd be, like, "Yo, don't use that language. You know, we don't --" while we -- we would talk about all these things, like, we -- sometimes, language was a problem and people would be critical of each other about how people were appropriating culture, and so -- and at the same time, we were friends and, you know, some people grew up in New York and some people didn't, and people --

Amaka: So, you would just say, like, kind of generally left, but it wasn't --

Neha: It was -- it was -- I mean, it was left, it was radical, but I don't think it was -- I don't think it had an analysis of, like, postmodern fem-- postmodern feminism had of the state, you know? Like, of language, of -- of how -- how to be sensitive around, you know, different people's struggles. It was just very critical of, you know, the systems that we all felt oppressed under. Common -- common things, you know, that we were all -- for the most part-- we were all working class and -- and supported, you know, the -- you know, liberation of our communities, and -- and I think we didn't really understand what ally -- being an -- like, I don't think the people with white privilege really understood what being an ally [00:55:00] meant. And so, I think that kind of frustrated some of us, or just me

personally. But we (inaudible) didn't really even -- I would just get frustrated, but I didn't really get -- have the language to talk about it.

Amaka: And so, were -- I mean, was there a practice of, like, calling out particular behavior? Or --

Neha: No, it was a lot -- yeah, that was a problem. We didn't.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Neha: We didn't call each other out, and we would just get really mad at each other and, you know -- so, I think eventually, when we saw things or patterns and -- you know, that two people were taking advantage of their privilege, you know, we felt kind of -- like we had to come together and do something. But we would kind of be reactionary about [it, or?] the way we'd do that. And it was very hard to have those -- those very personal conversations. But it was more of what's happening. It's not like we were attacking each other -- not, like, really bringing in our political awareness. So, the -- yeah, those conversations were really, really hard to have.

Amaka: And would you describe -- or what -- what would you say the demographics of the City College chapter was?

Neha: So, when I -- (laughs) when I started organizing with SLAM!, you know, it was predominantly students of color, but they were -- you know, Rudolfo's Chilean and can pass as, you know, he's light. He's white. He passes white, but he very much identifies as immigrant and, you know, is very much a part of his community and immigrant issues. But I would say it was -- it was pretty -- you know, not so racially diverse. It was Hank, myself, Lydia, Syd -- who were both white -- and then, we had a few people that were not as (inaudible) as much, and then we -- and then, as the years went by, I would say Syd and -- some of us brought in, you know, more folks of color. We had Lydia and -- and Dee who were Nigerian and, you know, I don't think we had any West Indian students. We definitely didn't have any Asian, like, students at all. And I think, you know, I'm sure there were some radical Asians somewhere in City College. They just weren't in that space, and then a lot of -- I think it's also the demographics of that neighborhood. In the last year, we had a lot of the -- a group of Dominican friends that, you know, that we were all friends with that we kind of politicized -- we would come out with, and then they kind of got involved through us. But I don't think they were -- they weren't really (inaudible) they were just our friends, and -- but, you know, they -- some of them were more engaged than others, but I think we kind of expected the -- we had a lot of expectations of them and they just -- you know, they weren't there.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: So, you know, the demographics changed over time, but then there was (inaudible) also. (inaudible) Rudolfo, I think, were, like -- and Eric. They were -- we were kind of cliquey and, you know, a lot of us kind of -- Sydney dated Slab and Lydia and Rudolfo had a falling out, and so when there was a falling out, kind of felt like a gender division a lot of times. Like, a lot of times [would?], you know, like, we just weren't talking to each other, 'cause we just felt like someone was being foul to someone else, and it just got really ugly. And I think that was something that I really craved too, just 'cause, you know, there was -- there was -- it was a space -- you know, City College is in Harlem, and it's a -- it's embedded in this history (inaudible) typically a black and Latino struggle, and I couldn't -- I didn't really find my -- I didn't really understand the South Asian experience within that.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: And so, I really wanted to -- I really wanted to be around (inaudible) that, like, understood that specific history. And so, when I graduated, I was looking for South Asian organization to work with, 'cause I don't really know anything about, you know, the South Asian experience, and I didn't really have the language and -- but I felt like it was a different experience. So [01:00:00] I worked at, like, South Asian Youth Action and -- but, like, you know -- and I basically facilitated -- I was an educator and facilitated a leadership program around the issues that -- we used our curriculum and -- but things that I, you know, had already had experience with, so I feel like my work at SLAM! and at CUNY kind of really helped me, you know, prepare for that and helped me understand what I wanted to do. And I didn't do the exact same thing. I looked for my community intentionally, but -- so, I became really

involved with the South Asian Community and immigrant community (inaudible). You know, I kind of feel a bit -- I'm not as engaged with stuff at City College, but I feel like, you know, my energy [kept on?] --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- to other things. But, you know, I -- I'm personally friends with everyone -- Rudolfo -- I haven't talked to Hank in a while, (inaudible) but a lot of us -- you know, our personal stuff got in the way, I think, too. And it was also the administration's attack on the room just kind of drained us. And we, you know, we're trying to finish our education, we couldn't -- it just -- it was taking so much -- it was requiring a lot of our energy, it kind of -- and they did -- they did their job, you know, at --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- really disempowering us and I've -- there were so many times where I felt guilty about not doing enough and feeling like, oh, I really need to be there and there's a vacuum, and no one's doing anything, and feeling really bad. And I remember we used to kind of get on each other, too. Like, I remember one once I was, like, waitressing at this bar in the Village, and we're -- I got a call from Ronald McGuire, and he was, like, you know, I think (inaudible) Lydia are really, like, tired from all the organizing they're doing, you really need to step up. And I'm, like -- I just felt, like, so guilty about not being able to do more. But I -- I kind of had made up my mind that I had -- I was doing -- I couldn't give any more, you know? Like, it -- they -- it was just -- [it did?] -- some days were good days and we felt like, okay, we have a lot of support and there are a lot of people emailing us and -- lot of other people reaching out to us, and elders, and so many people that have our backs. But when it came down to doing a lot of the work, it was -- it had to be us. Like, we had to be, you know, on the front line of that all the time. And I think that kind of hurt our rela-- our personal relationships a lot, and -- and, you know, I tried to -- we tried to organize, like reunions. You know, also, you graduate, and you're not in that space. There's only so much you can do, and I think Rudolfo did the best that he could, 'cause he works for City College. So, he was employed by the architecture department, and he worked for the library, too, so he was always in the school and kind of passed the baton on (inaudible) the new generation, kind of understand the space and how the administration handles things. So, I would always get my, you know, 411 from him and what was going on. Just really hope that they were -- that space would always have kind of that same energy and people would really use it. And, yeah, [when?] -- I think it was during the whole time where we -- where they took the sign off the wall and (inaudible) newspaper, and all of us also had boundaries in terms of how much we wanted to put ourselves out there. And, you know, we were in the newspaper and, like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- we felt like, you know, we understood that it -- people that were not documentable -- so had a certain level of -- of -- that they could participate in. And also, you know (inaudible) I felt like some people did better at -- you know, I -- I wanted to do a lot of the media stuff, and I was okay with that, but I didn't know how much I wanted to, you know, engage with so many of the other organizations also wanted to be -- help us and be a part of it. And, you know, everybody -- when you're in the spotlight, we just felt like everybody --

Amaka: Right.

Neha: -- wanted to say that they had our back, [01:05:00] and then, you know, at the end of the day, it didn't really feel -- you know, a few -- a few weeks later, [they'd just?] -- like, everything lost steam and it was still us having to do everything. So, it was a little bit discouraging. You know, we realized that the administration had a clear advantage. We were, like, okay, we're still going to be who we are, we're still going to function. But they're not going to acknowledge our history and -- so, we still called it -- you know Assata Shakur call it the student center, but we realized that it -- the space was becoming -- it was changing a bit. I mean, we had a particular problem with this Zionist guy who reported us to the -- to The Daily News 'cause of one of our events supporting Palestine. So, you know, he -- he had his own issues and was just a fascist and a Zionist, and didn't like, you know, our anti-war events and things. But -- and after that, it all went -- it all went downhill.

Amaka: So, what year did -- what year did SLAM! end or the second kind of SLAM! ended at City College?

Neha: I would say 2006 or 7 or 8. Yeah, I mean, they functioned under Students for Educational Rights? Like, they're the new [group?]. You know, we also realized that us being an actual club in the school was problematic, because, you know, you have to apply for school funds, and they were just not -- they were -- you know, we couldn't do the things we wanted, because have the events with -- you know, we were -- it was hard to get approved, it was hard to put our flyers up, they just made it hell. So, we were just, like, we need to operate under a different name and do the same things. So Students for Educational Rights was (inaudible) you know. And basically SLAM! came out of SER, Students for Educational Rights. It was like, we were, like, let's just operate under that name. It's safer, and we'll -- we'll do the same things. So, that's what happened. I think Winston and a few other people were involved in that.

Amaka: And who would you say -- we've already mentioned names already but, like, who would you call core members in SLAM! over the years?

Neha: So, the -- oh, Rob Wallace, Rudolfo [Layton?], Lydia [Sepolda?], Sydney [Cooley?]. Slab was kind of peripheral, but Slab. Not sure if he was a member, but he was definitely around for a lot of things. Eric O'Dell. Maria Bautista. Another Lydia (inaudible) [Forcier?], they were -- I mean, they had less involvement, but in the last years -- I said. Q -- we called him Q, but --

Amaka: Quentin?

Neha: Quentin, yeah. Or -- no, his real name is -- I don't -- I don't think I know his real name.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Neha: But Q. Patricia, we call her Gia, Rodriguez. She's an immigration lawyer now. She's -- I'm still in touch with her. But, yeah, that's pretty much it.

Amaka: Okay. What -- how would you describe the structure of -- in terms of how you guys made decisions and (inaudible) kind of, you know --

Neha: I -- it's funny, 'cause -- so we'd have meetings, and we would kind of talk about different things and, like, I mean, not really consensus but not really vote either. We would do a little bit of back and forth, but we would kind of gauge how important it was for us to have a decision as a consensus. There -- you know, if you had an issue, we would talk about why, why not, or why, yes, and eventually -- I guess it was consensus, for the most part. But we would get annoyed with it after a while and say, okay, we need to make decisions. And we'd -- we kind of, [01:10:00] you know, we really liked the idea of consensus --

Amaka: [Right?].

Neha: -- decision making, but I think we realized that if we just sat there and talked about everything for too long, we wouldn't actually get anything done. And we were very action based and just wanted to do stuff all the time, so you know, (inaudible), you know, to make -- (inaudible) basic-- a big thing was if you had a suggestion (inaudible) you had to lead it. Like, you can't throw something out there and then expect all of us to -- to, you know, do your work. Like, you had an idea, you -- that's your idea. Like, you -- you be the main -- you head that, and then we will follow. But I think we got really annoyed by people who said, "Well, I know what you -- I know what you should do. You guys should" -- it was, like, "Whoa, whoa" (inaudible) So, you know, and there was some back and forth with us, understanding that that was just a really frustrating process of -- you know, saying we had an issue and then having all these, you know solutions and answers and then nobody executed them. So, you know, we'd pretty much decided that if someone brought something up -- should be willing to do that work. And then, we would all [assign the different duties working committees?], like, different working committees. So, it was, like, okay, we need -- for this event, he would do the flyer, you -- you would do the workshop, you know, you would recruit or whatever, and it was -- it was nice, 'cause it felt like, okay, we're all giving what we are able to give within our boundaries. But if we can't, then we understand that. But, you know, I realize that sometimes you would come to meeting and kind of the morale would be kind of down, and it was just really important for me, whenever I was facilitating the meetings to be, like, really high energy and get peopled just to not feel bogged down by everything. So, you know, we -- we'd just spend a lot of time just checking in with each other. Like, "How are you surviving in your classes? Your week?"

And what's the temperature check right now in the room?" And, like, you know, also for us to just to -- to care about each other's needs and not feel so -- so much -- like, formal space. I think when we did that, we really operated much better. We were also learning, so, yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: Yeah, I mean, we would fall asleep in the space, take naps on the couch and -- (laughter) (inaudible) we were not able to do anything.

Amaka: What is your understanding of how SLAM! generally came to (inaudible) how -- yeah, how it generally (inaudible) [it started?], yeah.

Neha: Well, I guess the story that I heard is -- I'm not sure if it was Chris Day or -- I read Chris Day's paper and I know there was some -- I forgot the other -- the other (inaudible), but, man, that was just, like, you know, core group of men that were having these, like, ideological debates, and -- but then, also -- but then, I -- you know, and I'm a little confused about the kind of early history of SLAM!, because, you know, I know that it was very women of color-led, but I feel like that -- those women didn't really -- weren't a part of the initial, you know, building of SLAM!, so I know at some point they were talking about kind of the space, and then someone suggested that they should run for government (inaudible) some strategy of running for government would have -- would be really great. So, they ran for government and they did -- you know, they worked their asses off and did an amazing job and won student government and really became organized. I just remember hearing stories of, like, them having, like, dope hip-hop shows with Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and I was just, like, what? That's -- that's do dope. And, you know, they had a -- they had, like, a culture around them, you know, that were -- they were really plugged into what the students at Hunter wanted, their particular demographic wanted, and I just thought that was really interesting -- you know, that they would always read stuff, but -- I would hear from, newspapers about how SLAM! initially started. But I mean, a lot of it was second-hand, also, [01:15:00] and when I would talk to people, they would say other things.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: But I think -- you know, I got to -- Slab lives in my neighborhood, so we used to hang out, and I hung out with Daniel a bunch would hang out with Suzanne, and it was nice to hear their stories. And then, it was just, you know, really sad that they were having issues with the administration, 'cause, you know it's just a huge blow, demoralizing --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: (inaudible)

Amaka: What -- what was the perception of this -- City College, like, student body in regards to SLAM! at City College? How do you feel like you guys were perceived?

Neha: It's a -- you know, it differentiated based on who, you know, the public was. But, like, there was an ISO chapter, the International Socialist Organization. So, you know, there was all these other left political groups, and most of them were very different and lead -- were lead very different and had a very particular rhetoric, and wasn't interested in engaging with them. So, I think people kind of lumped us all together. Because sometimes we would collaborate on things, so, it -- we understood that we needed to reach out to folks that we need to realize, like, how they alienated a lot of people, you know, and took up a lot of space. And, you know, we -- we also talked a lot about -- we -- we were very critical of, you know, people of color issues within the left. So, I think some people liked that and were drawn to that, (inaudible) that we were different in terms of how we did things, were attracted to that, but then some people -- you know, City College has a big engineering program, so, you know, students are in a separate building and just are -- we didn't really engage with the students from those programs as much, and (inaudible) although, the architecture program was very big, also, and Rudolfo's in the architecture program -- but, you know, certain departments we just had a better relationship with because of the nature of what we were doing. Like, the history department, the English department -- I mean, we worked with the Spanish professor, Spanish language professor, who was our lead, like, liaison (inaudible), and radical professor and, you know, she would let us do announcements in her classes. She would -- she was great. So, it, you know, it really depended on who you were

talking to, who you were reaching out to. But people -- it was good, the book x-change. Like, everybody knew us. You know, some people are more comfortable than others about, you know, talking about who we were and -- so, in some cases, we were selective about who we talked to.

Amaka: So, how do you feel, like -- what has -- okay, can you speak to your trajectory after you graduated from CUNY? Like, what you were doing afterwards and, like, politically. Like, movement work that you've done since SLAM!, yeah.

Neha: So, yeah, after I -- after I graduated from City College, I took some time off to travel a little bit. I was a history major, but I was also a dual major in international relations. So, I traveled for a bit and then I applied for grad school. I went to the (inaudible) for a while, and then I dropped out. I realized that I really didn't like that wasn't -- didn't want to work at the U.N., and -- it was a very different environment for me, also. I was kind of traumatized by being in a very -- you know, I felt kind of privileged to be at CUNY and being in such a diverse space and, you know, felt like I was -- with my guard up every day, like, having to defend my people, every day, you know? Like, and it just took a lot out of me, and I also just (inaudible) program anymore. I didn't want to work at the U.N., and I was also working for a non-profit and felt like [01:20:00] I was being more useful to my community, so I dropped out of the graduate program and work -- start working for full-time with SAYA, South Asian Youth Action, was an educator there and was offered a full-time position to coordinate a youth program at a school in Queens, a public school, high school. And just felt like I did that that really well, understood the youth and the issues that youth are going through. And so did that for a few years, and I think that did a lot for me in terms of making sense of everything I learned before that, access to education and just class -- everything. Class issues, immigration, challenges of, you know, getting an education in a public school, and so it did a lot for me and I was really happy there, but I just wasn't happy with the politics of the non-profit after a few years. The executive director changed, and so -- but I knew I was -- like, wanted to work in -- in that, you know, in that field, so I started doing more -- more and more media stuff. Rudolfo was also doing a lot of media stuff, and I -- I started documenting -- at the end of my kind of participation with SLAM!, I got into, like, photography and videography, 'cause I realized, like, how important it is for us to document, you know, the stories and give voice to our stories, and so I did a lot of, like, media projects with youth and kind of felt really empowered through that. And so, now I do a lot of freelance photography and video stuff, and -- which -- it feels really good and empowering for me, because it's -- it's not a field, you know, I could make a lot of money -- it's maybe-maybe, that's not my agenda and goal. But, you know, I'm a woman, there's not a lot of women in media and there's not a lot of women of color in the media. But it just does so much for, you know, people that you give -- you help to bring their stories to life. So, I still -- I wanted to find another organization that was working with youth [in dynamic ways?], and so, try working [with Global Kids?], and, you know, they have several -- they only work with -- with contracts that are at public schools. And so, I -- I've always worked in public schools in Queens and mostly with Indo-Caribbean and South Asian, very diverse communities that are dealing with similar issues, so -- you know, and there are a lot of people that I work with are -- are critical educators that have tried to teach and realized that, you know, it's hard for them to kind of execute the curriculum that they want and are kind of fed up with (inaudible) and with public education, and so -- you know, where there's constant conversation around education, and I feel like, you know, my -- my whole history at CUNY is pretty much (inaudible). There are youth now that -- who work with that -- are organizers at different CUNY schools and, you know, they study SLAM!, and I just get so blown away, and they read Chris Day's, like, paper and, you know, they -- they know other SLAM! folks, and I've seen them at events and talk to them. And I think I sometimes feel very, you know, disconnected to that, but I realize that, you know, a lot of that did impact, kind of, a culture and space at some schools, and it is -- still is there. But I'm not very connected to it. And, you know, we help our students pick the CUNYs that they want to and talk to them about CUNYs, and some of them are, like, I'm not going to CUNY 'cause I'm better than that. And we talk about what that means. So, yeah, I think they -- you know, I definitely see where everything that I do is just very personal, very much attached to that history that I was a part.

Amaka: I guess, now, like, how do you feel, like that period of your life -- like, being in SLAM!, how it may have shaped you in terms of how you are now. Like, can you speak to that? If it is. (laughs)

Neha: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. [01:25:00] You know, we -- I learned about popular education through SLAM!, and, you know, I think I became a critical educator through my participation in SLAM! and was very aware of space and language and, you know, also how you empower people (inaudible) space and be critical of that. So, I -- you know, I -- I -- very aware of that in, like, dynamics of -- of the classroom when I'm in a classroom -- try to bring those

things in in the ways that I can, and -- without even using that language, you know? And I think some of the people I work with are also, you know, coming from that trajectory and, you know, a lot -- some -- it's funny to me, like, I really think I was hired based on my affiliations with SLAM!, because a woman that had interviewed me knew kind of what SLAM! was about and was, like, "Yeah, our organization is very much about that. And you know these people," and, you know, was, like -- kind of trusted where I was coming from. And I -- you know, I dropped names, and was like, "Yeah, yeah," da-da-da, and I was just so happy that, you know, instead of -- 'cause, you know, my -- the organization I worked with before wasn't coming from a radical place. More like, you know, non-profit, just service. So, you know, I feel like now I -- we have critical conversations about education and the issues that our students, we talk about immigration and about the DREAM Act. We have -- we have workshops around how to help our youth applying for DREAM Act and, you know, all these things. So, it just helped me with the language, it helped me understand how to better empower our young people, and I feel like -- yeah, it's just really impactful.

Amaka: You've already spoken a little bit to this, but, like, what lessons did you take from that period? And maybe, like, what do you think the significance of SLAM! was or is?

Neha: I think one of the things that I learned was that -- you know, how to -- definitely how you organize. It doesn't -- you don't -- your numbers are important, but we definitely got a lot done with six of us, you know? And it was just how we made decisions and how -- you know, how much we really respected each other's boundaries, and we just did what we wanted to do. If we did what we wanted to do, it would work -- we were more likely to work at it and do what we were able to without feeling drained and bogged down by what we were doing. So, I think sometimes we worried about numbers, but it was really more about strategy and -- so, it's possibly having conversations about how to effectively organize and what our agendas -- agenda was, and also being really -- I think I learned a lot about how to be critical of not just the ends but definitely the means of how you get to that point, you know? Like, what's the whole point if you're not -- if the process isn't, you know, empowering, you know, involving different voices, and -- oh, so, I really appreciate that now. Especially, like, diversity, -- diversity of opinion and diversity of experiences, checking who is making decisions and what voices we're leaving out. And, you know, not -- definitely not afraid to -- to check that, even though it's -- it is -- it's really, really hard. I think people always have a hard time checking our privilege and -- but how necessary it is. We can't get anywhere till we have those conversations with -- really, really hard conversations about internal structure. You know, there's no point if we're not doing it in a way that empowers all of us. So, I think [01:30:00] I've learned a lot about that. You know, so, definitely step up, step back, like, this is really real, and I still use it a lot. I think I've also learned how much relationships within the organization can hurt or, you know, affect the way we organize with each other. I think I definitely have more boundaries with my organizing now, and how, you know, close I get with the people -- with folks that I have this relationship with, because I do want to operate in a way that is not going to, you know, make me feel alienated or disconnected from the larger picture of what I'm doing because of my personal relationship with someone. So, just learned a lot about how to -- definitely how to communicate. Communication -- it sounds so simple, but it's so hard for so many people, just how to be a strong communicator. You know, a lot of us have our own stuff and are struggling to heal from so many things, and I feel like, you know, sometimes we -- we don't have those hard conversations about where people are at, and I think it's really important to see where people are coming from before you have expectations of them, just to not judge where people are coming from if you don't know their struggle, you don't know what they've been through. You know, even though we were at City College, there's still some kind of elitism and stuff that we bring, you know, and judgement that we bring that -- realizing that we bring that stuff and we're not all at the same place, and that's okay. Yeah.

Amaka: Anything else that you haven't emphasized or included that you want to include? I don't have any more specific questions.

Neha: I think, you know, I think SLAM! was very -- was very special, integral about keeping the history -- the struggle at CUNY kind of alive and accessible for everyone, because what it meant -- and access to education was the fundamental thing that we all, you know, fell under, but there's so many issues tied to that. And so, you know, it was such a -- it was a fundamental umbrella that we all kind of operated against -- under, but then, like, you know, you could talk about race, you could talk about class, you could talk about privatization. Every -- you know, it was just -- that -- that was -- that's really what separated out from so many organizations, because their basis was ideological and, you know, so it -- it was like a -- it was an organization that didn't really, you know, have a -- an ideological requirement for people to have. It just -- you know, the demands spoke to what our communities were going under. And so, I think a lot of us found that a lot more accessible, and under that, you can -- you can do so

much, you can engage so many conversations you can't -- we were in so many, like, struggles, 'cause you don't have that requirement, you know --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- 'cause we have commonalities if we're fighting these things, and still have some diversity. So, I think that was the special, you know, and allowed us -- that was probably one of our strengths, as well. You know, really special that a lot of people don't see organizations like that. And I just hope that, you know, the history of it is documented, 'cause I -- I realize that if it's not documented, then, you know, we're just -- we're -- we're reinventing the wheel, like, over and over again. The next generation is just -- it's the same struggle, it's the same things happening over and over again. And, you know, I really wish there was a way for -- for different generations of activists at CUNY to -- [01:35:00] to help share these stories with -- with other generations that are now dealing with very similar issues around privatization or around education, space, and class, gender, and all of these things. I hope that it continues, hope there's a way for activists -- 'cause they're still around. I mean, they're all around -- to come back together and take these (inaudible) you know, the generation [that comes now?], because I think if we just think of it as such a different landscape that is just overwhelmed by, you know, having -- bringing these issues, you know, up, but I know that there's people out there that want to know and listen. So I just hope that something comes -- something will come together in the near future -- would be nice. I did engage a little bit with, you know, David around stuff at the center recently, and I think there was, like, a huge snowstorm with -- that one of the --

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: -- they had an action, and I just really wanted to go and was really -- I mean, it's -- it's horrible what's happening, it's just awful, but I was also really excited about just having, you know, this community again. So, you know, it sounds awful, but sometimes community comes together to -- you know, out of really disgusting things.

Amaka: Yeah.

Neha: So, somewhat vocal, but really -- you know, a little bit sad about the way that things have progressed at City College. Just really hoping that students have a place to -- to voice the issues in their community and have a space to -- to be leaders, and for their own self-determination. Yeah, it -- it's -- it's really -- it was just gut-wrenching to read what happened there. It just felt like I was going through everything again. It was just, like, oh, it's the same story, you know? Like, this is never -- you realize, like, how powerful it must be for them to -- to see this as a threat, to feel like that -- you know, to disempower the space and need to find it so threatening. We must be -- we must have been powerful, so it's horrible, but I -- I -- I hope that we can still come together as -- as (inaudible). (laughs)

Amaka: Okay, that's -- that's everything. (laughter) That's good, thank you so much.

Neha: Oh, yeah, [yeah?].

END OF AUDIO FILE