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Interview with Irini Neofotistos
Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: Don't think too hard about it, I guess. Okay, so can you state your name?
Irini Neofotistos: Yes. I'm Irini Neofotistos.
Amaka: And can you state your age?
Irini: Thirty-four.
Amaka: And how do you identify racially?
Irini: That should not be hard to answer, but I'm Greek, so that's how I answer it.
Amaka: Okay. And how do you identify your gender?
Irini: Female.
Amaka: How do you identify your sexual orientation?
Irini: Straight.
Amaka: And your marital status?
Irini: Married.
Amaka: Do you have children?
Irini: I have two children.
Amaka: Okay. Okay, so in terms -- I guess I'll just jump, because I usually go into more biographical information. But the last time I talked to you, you answered a lot of those questions. So I'm going to skip. So you attended Hunter. What years did you attend Hunter?
Irini: I was at Hunter from '96 to 2000, yeah.
Amaka: Okay. And why did you choose Hunter to go to?
Irini: Good question. So it was important for me to be at a city university. I visited a lot of different campuses. And I really wanted -- well, for financial reasons I needed to go to a city university. I was accepted into NYU, and that was not going to happen for me. But I also like the environment at CUNY. I was initially thinking about Adelphi University, so one of the SUNYs. And once I visited Hunter, it was locked. It was done.
Amaka: So what was it about it?
Irini: I think it was a combination of the vitality of the campus. It wasn't -- you know, I envisioned going to a college and wanted a campus. I wanted the whole going away experience, starting new experience. So initially going to Manhattan was not what I had envisioned. But I visited those other campuses, and they didn't speak to me the way that Hunter did. There was something about the hustle and bustle of it. It was very contained in several buildings, which I didn't think I would like but eventually was a good thing because it was very accessible. But there was an energy on campus that was very electric. And I happened to be there at a time when there -- I actually visited right around May when I was graduating because I needed to make a determination about where I would go. And there were a lot of open houses happening at clubs. There were a lot of departments doing outreach to new students. And so, it was done. I went that day and didn't leave for the next four or five years.

Amaka: So when you entered Hunter, how do you remember the political atmosphere being at Hunter? And then you could also speak more generally, I guess, to the city, you know, what the political moment was during that time?
Irini: Well, I was 16 when I first visited Hunter, so I was really young. And I was trying to -- that was actually the question that I wanted to answer for myself. There was a lot of -- there was a lot of stuff happening in the city. It was a time where there was a lot of repression. So there were a lot of discussions about like, quality of life, and what does that mean, and for whom? And then in terms of -- I remember, in terms of the campus, I was -- when I first visited I was trying to get a sense of, like, who was around? And were there people that I can connect with? And what was the moment that was being experienced? So I was organizing at the time in high school, and not around education. So it was important for me to find where I would -- if there was alignment politically for me with folks on campus. And I fell into a GROW training through USSA. And they were basically doing a -- their standard GROW training that weekend. And so I said, yes, I'm going to go to that.
Amaka: What's a GROW training?
Irini: A GROW training, gosh, I should know this because my husband was a trainer and I went through the training. So I should know this. But it was many, many years ago. But it was basics on organizing. How do you assess [00:05:00] power? How do you build with a variety of people? It was very centered around students. And so, I met a lot of really dynamic people there that kind of brought me in to the SLAM! space that was very much in transition at that time. So I came to SLAM! almost immediately. And it was one of the reasons that Hunter was such a good experience for me. But I came in also academically, recognizing that I was probably at the top tier of how people come in. So I was part of a block program which, at the time, was the university's you know, response to try to get freshmen into a cohort. So we would take -- it was very much like high school. So you would take, you know, your block classes, which were the ones that would fulfill your academic requirements with a group of people that follow you throughout the next few semesters. And that was great. But I also understood that the folks that got into the block program were very different than the folks that came in through remedial classes. So very, very early on I realized that there was -- that the school was very stratified in terms of academics. So I was appreciative to have that experience. But I also recognize that wasn't everybody's experience.
Amaka: Right. How would you describe yourself politically when you came in? I mean, you're young. You're 16 years old. You're younger than most people coming in. But like you mentioned, you had been organizing in high school and stuff like that. So I mean, how would you describe that? And you could also speak to the stuff that you were doing in high school as well.
Irini: Yeah, so my family was very politically active. I don't know if I've mentioned it to you, but I think that part of the reason that SLAM! was so successful is that we were the second generation of organizers coming in in most cases. We did a lot of political education. We shared a lot of information with each other. But I think the reason that we were so strong is that we had a lot of experience to pull from. So I was searching. I was looking for folks. I didn't have the language for what my experiences were yet. I knew that building community and power was important. I came into organizing because there was work happening in the Greek community in two issue areas. One was the occupation of Cyprus. So occupation, power, self-determination was something that was always important to me. And then there were a lot of -- there was a lot of work happening in the Greek community around borders, and what does it mean to be Greek, and who can claim that? So at the time -- and people still use this tagline and it's still very problematic to me, around Macedonia. So historically, there was no separation, the lines that we now understand as starting and ending points of countries that were not always the same historically. And so, it was always -- you know, so at the time there was this big movement to not allow the country, the former Yugoslav Republic, to claim the name Macedonia because then the theory was that it would be an opportunity to rewrite history, recreate maps and erase a history of a people that was there before them. And to me, the whole argument was weak. It in fact was an active erasure of the people that were living there presently. And I just didn't have peers that I could have these conversations with. And so, politically I was trying to find language to put to what didn't feel right but then also fight for what was [00:10:00] right. And so, I came into that space looking for that. And I think the way that I did, other folks found that space for similar reasons, not same context.
Amaka: Right, right, right. Okay. How -- I guess before we get into the specifics of your experience in SLAM!, how do you understand the creation of SLAM!? Because you came in, what, fall '96?
Irini: I came in in the summer of '96.
Amaka: Summer of '96, okay. So SLAM! had just really started to come together. So how -- can you explain the creation of SLAM! or, like, what your understanding of that creation was? Like, I've heard many people talk about it coming out of the CUNY coalition. I've heard people reference Student Power Movement. Like, I'm just, you know, trying to figure out where. And I think it's because different people came from different things into SLAM!. But can you speak to that?

Irini: Yeah, I can only speak to what I know. I came into SLAM! at a time where it did not -- it was just coming into holding resources at Hunter. There was a major and very antagonistic relationship between the former student government, who was corrupt and stealing money -- and this is not something that was made up. I mean, there's documentation about how there was an inappropriate relationship to student funds and student organizations based on this group. And at the same time, students that were organizing citywide rallies to -- one, to educate other students about what was happening in terms of resources to next generations of students being taken away, but also being very vocal that this is not something that is acceptable, that is going to go down easy. You know, there was power being built. And I've been using "power" a lot. So I don't know. I don't think I came in to SLAM! with that language. So but there was a shift. There was a shift on campus in terms of who should represent us, who should hold resources and who has the students' best interest in mind. And clearly the folks that were in there were not the folks. And then the folks that were developing this, I don't think they ever said, oh, and we're going to, you know, take over the student government. But it happened organically that those things happened at the same time. I was not part of those conversations, so I can't speak to that. But I -- so I mentioned the GROW training earlier. That was something that was organized by the prior corrupt student government. And so, those are the folks that I initially met. But those are not the folks that I necessarily aligned myself with. And so, when I learned that the folks that I politically understood to be my people were doing this work I wanted to support them. And so, I came into SLAM! understanding that there was something happening on campus that was important. But it was linked to something that was much bigger than our experience at Hunter. And that's when I started to learn a little bit about kind of the structures even within the university system. Like, why was LaGuardia -- that was in my borough, different from Queens College, different from Hunter College? And this is very -- still very premature because this -- you know, the discussions of having honor colleges was not even part of the conversation yet. But it was building those basic elements, those basic building blocks that were able then -- where we were able then to make connections to what was happening in a more global sense. And I think for me it was coming into a community that I recognized but that I wasn't a part of previous to that. And so, I had a pretty isolated -- I was pretty isolated before coming to Hunter. And so, for me, being at Hunter and seeing who the students were kind of opened up a whole new world for me that I wasn't exposed to but that I understood was -- you know, [00:15:00] they're my contemporaries. They're my peers.

Amaka: Right, right. So this is a structure question, which I guess there's many parts to this because we have -- you know, there's Hunter SLAM! in relationship to other campus SLAM! chapters. There's, you know, Hunter SLAM! and student government versus -- you know, student government meetings versus, you know, folks that aren't in student government meeting. And so, I'm asking how would you describe the structure, the internal structure, of SLAM!? And let me actually read this thing first. It's a question that I have. So this is -- I guess I have, like, a timeline of events, basically. And so, I guess this was during winter inter-session, so '95/'96. It was decided by student activists to establish Student Liberation Action Movement, a new structure that would guarantee decisions were being made by student activists that had a real base on their campuses by requiring each campus to delegate four members to participate in CUNY-wide meetings and limiting off-campus participation to invited groups. They also require that each delegation be at least half women and half people of color. And so, I'm asking -- I read that piece because I wasn't clear if that was actually a practice or if that shifted over times in terms of like that -- it's a very clear kind of almost rigid structure. You have this many members to delegate to these larger meetings. Did that work in practice in your experience in SLAM!? Is that accurate? Or is it a little bit more nuanced or, you know, different than that?

Irini: I'm actually surprised hearing this because I never experienced it that way. I actually didn't know that that existed. And the first -- when you're -- as you were reading this I actually went to a memory that I had. While I was leaving SLAM! there was an organization that basically claimed the name SLAM!. And they were not us, obviously. But then, how do we challenge that? And so, in that process, some of this stuff came up. But the folks -- so, that was one kind of experience. And then there was another experience where there were citywide meetings. And I remember going to citywide meetings. And a lot of them were held at the graduate center. And SLAM! was part of those meetings. But they were not SLAM! meetings of folks at different campuses. So it wasn't like four students from Brooklyn College and four students from Baruch were attending, and it was a SLAM! citywide meeting. I never experienced that way. I did experience Hunter very much being a hub for students that were organizing at other campuses. So Orlando Green is a great example of this. He was the president of BSU at Baruch College. But I met him at Hunter. Suzy Subways is another one, Brad Sigal. These are folks that -- Slab was at Queens College. But they were very limited times that I remember going to other campuses to meet with other SLAM! folks. And so, I didn't experience it functioning anywhere near that.

Amaka: So then, what was SLAM!'s -- I mean, though Hunter was the strongest chapter, there were at times chapters in other spaces. So then, what was Hunter's relationship to those other chapters, or yeah?

Irini: I don't think it's as formal as -- I don't think the relationship between SLAM! and student government are formal. I don't think the relationship between SLAM! members of different chapters are formal. In fact, I don't think that even within Hunter SLAM! there were formal relationships. In fact, that was one of the most puzzling and frustrating things about being part of Hunter SLAM!. And I say that because we were -- on the one hand [00:20:00] on the one hand we talked a lot about transparency. We talked a lot about and challenged leadership, and challenged each other in terms of how we interacted with one another. And then at other times things just arbitrarily -- what seemed arbitrarily happened. And so, there was informal understanding of who the leaders were. But those leaders never claimed that. And so, part of my frustration, and I'm mentioning it only because I know it wasn't specific to me, was how do you wrangle something that you don't quite understand but still move it forward?
Amaka: Right. You know, that is -- it's helpful in some ways that you say it that way because, you know, I've been trying to, via different interviews and just kind of reflecting, when I talk to some people it seems as if SLAM! was just a mass membership organization. Anyone could show up and be involved in whatever. I've talked to other people who said, well, no, I was invited. Like, I had to be invited, and SLAM! was kind of cliquey, even though I ended up becoming part of it. But it was kind of cliquey, and I had to be invited. And it was more cadre-style than like a mass membership thing. And you know, there's -- you know, like you mentioned, that's kind of like this core, even though it's not a formal core. But there's a core. And then there's kind of other folk. And so, I guess I'm wondering, in terms of structure, you know, how would you -- I mean, is it more mass? I mean, is it somewhere in between? Are there -- you know, is there truth to anything that I've just mentioned in terms...
Irini: There's truth to all of that. So we'll do it this way. Nobody was ever turned away from a rally. The more people, the better. The more folks we had sharing information about what was happening, what the policies were, what the meetings were, where we needed bodies, the better. From a worker perspective, anybody that wanted to work would be plugged in. It was sometimes their choice what they worked on. And sometimes things that folks wanted to work on they were not allowed to. And I don't -- and sometimes it was just informal, like somebody's got that. We don't need you there. We need you here. So and you know, and that's how it was stratified. But decisions in terms of how this body would move were made very tactfully, very strategically. And the problem was that internally there was a lot of unspokens about what the structure was. And so, you can only challenge to a certain degree before you were put in check. That happened to me lots of times where I felt like, oh yeah, this is -- I'm part of this inner circle, and was very skillfully shown that that was not the case. And so...
Amaka: Okay, so then -- okay. So you started the student government positions for SLAM!, correct?
Irini: I did.
Amaka: Okay. So what was that -- I mean, how did it -- most organizations don't have that kind of -- you know, particularly student organizations have some members that are in student government. And then you kind of have another body of folk that are connected to that. But they're not serving in those office positions. And so how did that function, like on the day to day? I mean, the people that were in SLAM! that were on student government, they had their own student government meetings, and then they go to other kind of more general SLAM! meetings? How do student government officers function in, like, the more general meetings? What was that looking like on a day-to-day basis?
Irini: So just to just put a little bit of what is it and what isn't it, I don't know that SLAM! meetings were ever formal. Student government meetings were formal. And business sometimes overlapped around actionable steps [00:20:00]. So imagine, you know -- and I'll go back to this question. But you know, for student government we held meetings -- I'm sorry, we held minutes. There were particular meeting times. A lot of the decisions that SLAM! made in terms of strategy didn't happen that way. They might have happened at somebody's house. They might have happened at Hunter, at the Hunter College space. But there was a very tight relationship between the folks that were in leadership. And so -- and there was trust there. And so, they didn't operate in that way. But now I'm going to backtrack a little bit. So when SLAM! decided to -- and I'm saying "when SLAM!" because for me there was no time before that. I didn't experience a time before there was a SLAM!, right? So when SLAM! came in to student government -- and I was there at the time when that shift was happening -- it was very clear that the resources that were available would serve students at Hunter but also are resources that students in general should have. By virtue of the fact, however, that we had a student government space, those are very rigid structures. A student government is a student -- you know, whether you're in -- you know, a student a government is a student government no matter where you are. We brought a particular political perspective to it. But a student government has certain responsibilities. And so, to earn our keep, so to speak, and to ensure that those resources were ones that we had access to -- and again, it wasn't for self-serving reasons, but with this larger political ideology in mind it was important that it function as a student government and that it serve. So we were very mindful about how we used those resources, how we better used those resources to serve the students at Hunter. So from 9:00 to 5:00, or whatever those hours were -- I don't think we ever opened at 9:00, but I could be wrong about that, although we did

stay way into the night -- we were accessible for the student body. There were staff there. There was business being conducted. There were -- you know, there was money being signed off on. There were budgets being approved. And we were talking about the resources that students need to be effective at being students. At the same time, not anybody can just come in and being -- and even in the student government positions, not anybody can hold those positions because there was strategy involved. Like, if you came in saying I want to be the certain whatever your title is, and that's how I'm serving, without having this larger ideological understanding of what the purpose of having these resources were, it was not an environment that you can stay in in the long haul. There were expectations that you have a more global understanding and worldview. And not everybody came in at the same level. So part of that was developed. But you had to be open to that understanding and challenge yourself in terms of that growth. Now, because of these strategic resources, however, those are the strategic resources that allowed Hunter to be -- one, we had a space. I mean, how easy is it to tell folks just come to the office. There's a critical mass of folks that are always there. And so, some of the -- what I would consider, like, SLAM! leaders, some of those functioned also in student government offices. And some never did. And so, it isn't like this clear line of like you're going to be student government and SLAM!. Or, you can't do SLAM! unless you do student government. That never existed, which is why that hierarchy is odd [00:30:00] to follow and to map, because it just didn't function that way. There was also a very interesting dynamic between, and alliance and allegiance between the student paper, The Envoy, and the student government. Folks that were in The Envoy, similar to the student government, they had to run a paper. And so, they put out a publication. They had student writers. But the leadership there also understood that those resources were a vehicle for students' voices to get out. And that included a political voice on campus. And so, there was a lot of allegiance not just in terms of titles and given authority, if you would, but the way that we functioned. So from a strategic question, in terms of how to move forward an agenda, that started off very, very focused on students and access to education but then very quickly snowballed into an understanding of resources and power that was much greater than that. So that starting point grew also as we as people grew. And so, it was very fluid. I don't know if that answers your question.

Amaka: Yeah, it does. You mentioned that, I guess, outside of the student government SLAM! meetings were informal. Do you mean in terms of kind of core of the leadership and that kind of strategizing being informal? Or do you just mean generally? Like, and I guess my question is, did SLAM! have, like, regular meetings? Like, outside of student government, did SLAM! have regular meetings? And if so, what happened at those meetings? If not, when would SLAM! meet?

Irini: I feel like this shouldn't be hard answer -- a hard question to answer. But I'm struggling to answer it. Have I ever been to an explicitly SLAM! -- an explicit SLAM! meeting? And the reason I'm having trouble answering it is because there was a lot of energy at certain times of the year, and particularly around decisions that were about to happen at the chancellor's office or, you know, with the regents, or when the university itself was putting policies into place. There was -- or if they were -- you know, there were huge, you know, citywide events that were happening around police brutality, for example, or political prisons. There was energy. Did I say political prisons? So Mumia, for example, was a huge work that we -- you know, we did a lot of work around that. And so, when there was a moment, that campus was energized. And that was never about student government. That was creating a space for folks, whether they had been organizing in The Bronx and wanted to plug into that work, whether they had been a student at Hunter or a different campus. But there was always a space for folks to come together. And yeah, we did call meetings at 8:00 PM. That was an open call for folks. And sometimes it was a formal, like, open call. We're going to be talking about this. But sometimes it just was -- eventually people just came. And so, yeah, it's hard to -- it was never the same at any moment in SLAM!, I don't think.

Amaka: Right. So then, I mean, and you know, correct me if I'm not interpreting this correctly. It seems as if a lot of the meetings -- not all of them, but a lot of the meetings would be called around particular, like, mobilizations, kind of, you know, direct, whether it was a rally or something like that. At these SLAM! meetings, were there mostly, like, discussions? Were there decisions being made at these meetings? Or was that saved for another time?

Irini: Yeah, [00:35:00] decisions were made. For example, if it was felt like -- you know, if we need to be out there to bring attention to a particular thing or to protest a particular thing, then there was a decision made. But then there were action steps that needed to follow. So in a case where you're calling for a mass mobilization outside of the chancellor's office, for lack of a better example, yeah, there are other campuses that need to get involved. There are permits that potentially have to be secured. There is a flyer that has to be made. There's outreach that needs to be done. There's class RAPs that we used to do to educate other students on campus. The bullhorn -- somebody has to bring the bullhorn, right? So where will that happen? So yeah, there's a series of things. And then, so things happened organically. But then things were planned. So after doing this for a while you kind of -- people knew what was expected of them because they had done it prior. And so, it wasn't like things magically happened. But there is escalation in terms of our skills, our leadership, our political education. I think there was a lot of effort put

into political education and kind of understanding, even outside of those moments. So let me think about what your actual very direct question was and see if I answered it. So the direct question was, is there an initial meeting? And then, are there followup meetings? Sometimes there are followup meetings. But sometimes it's just getting on a phone, calling somebody, talking to someone in the hallway. And we were about making it happen.
Amaka: Okay.
Irini: And let me not forget, there were also debriefs of what happened, because that was very much a part of, okay, so we said we were going to do this. Did it happen? What happened? Who stepped on whose toes, you know? We aired out a lot of that stuff, which is why the structure thing then becomes, who has formal authority and who doesn't? I mean, we didn't have the language to talk about it that way. But how do you call somebody out when they did something that you thought was inappropriate when that's the structure? How is accountability held?
Amaka: So are you saying that folks were not accountable because the structure wasn't clear or that -- the opposite of that, or somewhere in between?
Irini: Somewhere in between. I think people -- I think we -- look, we had a great group of people. So people were self-critical to a fault. Nobody could shred you down. You can do that for yourself. But you were also held, you know, to a group. And it was -- that's the stuff that got murky and ugly and hurt folks. That's why people got burnt out. I don't think it was ever about the work. It was the interpersonal relationships that you were building. That's what got messy. So yeah, people were -- there was a lot of accountability. And then there was a lot of political education, like why have women in power? Why have people of color in power? Those were important conversations. Why was it that, you know, even though we say that, they were very vocal, very visible white men that were not -- that didn't have necessarily -- you know, that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't, sometimes showed up and sometimes didn't. That all happened at the same time.
Amaka: Okay. So can you speak more specifically to how you saw the attack on open admissions kind of develop and escalate, and SLAM!'s relationship to that in terms of -- I mean, you can break that into two questions, but how you saw that, you know, attack escalate [00:40:00] as well as how SLAM! chose to respond/resist that.
Irini: Okay. So I'm going to answer it in a different way, and then tell me if this makes sense. It's kind of like when you ask somebody, like, what is love, and they tell you what is heartbreak. I'm going to have to kind of go there. But it's very centered around education and why it's important to the students that are involved. So for many of the students, myself included, this was the first opportunity to enter a college campus. This was the first time that they had -- I'll talk personally. So I was the first in my family to graduate. I wasn't the first to attend. That's different for other folks. But there was always an importance about getting a degree and what access that then gives you later in life. And when we said "Access is a right," we believed it. And so, to be on a campus where this is sometimes your only chance at getting a college education, and to then have challenges that students at other campuses sometimes didn't, so paying your tuition is already a huge burden. The fact that you have to work and also go to school is a huge burden. The fact that you can't always get, you know, enough money on that Metro card to get to school is a huge burden. Paying for your books is a huge burden. I mean, it was almost like a tease, like you have access to this, and make it happen. Show us what you've got. Prove yourself. And then to have policies that crack at that access, right, that's how we come into the conversation. So to understand the kind of -- the historic understanding, the historical moment in New York, but also the personal ambition that follows legacies of people, is the context. So now, to have any discussion about increases in tuition, any conversations about chipping away at remedial education, when most of the majority of the people coming into this are coming out of public high schools that didn't serve them, so why did they need remedial education in the first place? And then, so it's bone after bone being taken away. You never get the full meal, right? You just get the scraps. So we're coming into an understanding of education -- what that means for a family, what that means for a community, what that means for -- and you know, the list goes on and on. So there are personal struggles. But then there are political policies that are ripe, that are tangible and that are happening at that moment. And so, SLAM!, with these very politically minded people, and a mass of folks are coming at this from various perspectives. So yeah, we are going to go outside of the chancellor's office and make sure that they understand that students are not agreeing with these policies. Within our own university, conversations around who we have access to even as faculty -- you know, do we have full-time professors? Or do we have adjuncts with no office hours when a lot of us are working and can't get even to -- you know, to see them and to talk to our professors, and where they're not being compensated for that time? So those are two -- you know, then there were fights around, you know, CUNY safety. And we were a very politically active campus. And so, a decision about whether to hire more security officers was understood as a political act, especially when those resources could be going to paying for full-time faculty, right? [00:45:00] So we have a very politically charged understanding. And folks that -- I don't think any one SLAM! member always had the full picture. But there was something everybody could do and something everybody could focus on. So everything from, you know, what might seem like a great idea -- hey, why don't we get a CUNY Card? You know, CUNYs are thinking about

CUNY Cards. We'll get people's debit cards, their Metro cards, and their student ID all in one place. And we're like, no. It was months of, you know, work, months of political education, months of building. You know, to anybody else hearing it, it sounds like a great idea. Why not have one card that kind of does this? But what does that do to your liberties as a student? Why am I being tracked for how much I spend at a particular location? And so, all of these conversations are happening at the same time. But we're also taking proactive steps to educate the student body about why this is not in our best interest and why this is actually not about us, because our foot is already in the door. And we were very lucky to have elders that were part of these same conversations at City College, at Hostos College, generations, you know, decades prior, that are still part of guiding our conversations. You know, I've been thinking recently about what -- you know, to take Lenina's story, for example. I'm pretty sure you've had a chance to talk to her.

Amaka: Yeah, I've already interviewed her. And it's funny because since we first talked, I ended up planning this huge conference with Right to the City. And so, I've spent a lot of time with Rachel and with Lenina.

Irini: Yeah. So but I was thinking about her in particular. Like, her parents are both educated. They're both professors. Her mom is a dean at one of the CUNY colleges. So she has access to education. But she chose to be at Hunter. That says a lot. So she wasn't in my particular situation. She was in a different situation. But having access to those campuses was a political -- was an important political conversation and one that was worth putting -- building power around. So and then, you know, and then being able to question our administration and then CUNY administration on scrupulous practices, like why they were making decisions in the summer or during winter break and when they knew students could not be vocal on certain issues. And so, there was a savviness that was, you know, that was developed over time around those policies.

Amaka: Mm-hmm. Do you remember -- I mean, because you've already mentioned the CUNY card. And you know, I have seen and written down dates of particular protests and rallies and things like that.

Irini: Was the archive helpful with that?

Amaka: The archive was helpful. Chris Gunderson, all his stuff was supremely helpful, and in terms of dates in particular, even though it's funny because when you look at a -- when you go through flyers and things like that, we don't really think about it while we're doing it. But it's like years are really helpful. You know, it's like February 7th. What year? But so that was actually really helpful with dates. Do you remember any particular actions, meetings or anything like that in response to open admissions in particular? So you talked about you guys had to do a lot to, like, educate the student about, you know, some of these issues. How did you guys do that? So yeah, just can you speak to some of those things?

Irini: Yeah, so I'm very bad with dates.

Amaka: It's okay.

Irini: I don't know if I'll be able to get you dates.

Amaka: Dates is -- you don't have to. It's fine.

Irini: Yeah. So I do remember several protests outside of the chancellor's office. I think I made it into the building once. And the reason for that was there was very -- well, one is we weren't really there to -- we were there to disrupt [00:50:00] and bring visibility and kind of understanding of what was happening. There were times where SLAM! members testified at meetings. But there was an important -- in terms of the culture that we had developed, there were -- I don't know that we ever wanted a seat at the table, necessarily. So it wasn't about building one person's individual kind of positionality as a strategy. There are groups that do that. That's not where we were. We wanted to engage as many people as broadly as possible, one, because it was clear to us that even within the people that were -- that did believe that this was an important issue, the information that we have was not always accessible to us. So even when you're looking for this, it's hard to find. And so, if that was happening to us, it's pretty clear that this issue is not on people's radar as much as it should be. So political education was a big -- was one of the main strategies. And the way that we did that was by making sure that people at other campuses knew what was happening, but then also within our campus educating folks. And that happened through -- you know, we had club hours, for example, Wednesdays from 1:00 to 3:00, so going to the different clubs and making sure that those folks can then tell their members about what was happening. It was through organizing with different professors to go to people's classrooms and you know, give a three-minute introduction at the beginning of class and make sure that they know that when mobilizations were happening, that they were present. And yeah, so looking back, there was a lot more that we could have done. I don't know that we were good -- it was also a very different political moment. So I think years later I was like SLAM! had a website? What was that? Like, we were barely on email at the time. That had to do with the technological moment that we were in. So I don't know that we were good about engaging media, for example.

Amaka: Well, in some ways, I mean, you guys had the newspaper. So I'm sure that was used as...

Irini: But it was local. It was very -- it was to mobilize. It worked for what we wanted. But I don't know that we had kind of this grander scope of like how do we get, like, New York mobilized on this? It really wasn't where we were at. We really wanted to talk to other students. What was the question again? I don't even remember.
Amaka: I mean, you're answering it. I was just asking about kind of specific...
Irini: Yeah, specific tactics that we use?
Amaka: Yeah.
Irini: Yeah, and just even outside of the Hunter building where people were coming in and out, having protests and information available, so sometimes students came to us. But sometimes we went to students.
Amaka: Right, right. But having a visible presence on campus, yes, always -- it seems as if, you know, you guys were always available for both folks to come to you guys for stuff. But you were also in the classrooms and you know, coming out the buildings, and yeah. So I mean, I do get that sense. How would you describe the culture of SLAM!? You know, on one hand you definitely have a serious kind of intellectual engagement, right? You have an analysis, you know, so left, you know, organization. But there's many different people coming with many different political ideologies, you know, whether Communist, Maoist, you know, whatever, into the space. But you also have this kind of, you know, artsy, kind of funky, kind of fly going on as well. So how would you describe -- and some people have specifically used that, like it was fly. Like, it was just, you know...
Irini: That's how we recruited. There was a lot of flyness happening. Are you going to come to this rally? You know, there was a whole lot of -- yeah.
Amaka: Yeah, so how would you describe the culture of SLAM!?
Irini: Well, one is, I mean, the reason why it was [00:55:00] effective is because it was as intense as it was fun. It was people's home. Like, it is where you came to kick your shoes off and to just be with like-minded people. And so, that was very important to how you built anything. So yeah. But there was -- I mean, my first -- one of my first interactions was coming in to paint a banner. And so, there was a particular aesthetic to SLAM!, to SLAM! flyers, to our SLAM! office. I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of the office, but...
Amaka: Not -- I feel like I -- I haven't seen a lot of photos of the office.
Irini: It's probably unlike any other student government office you can imagine. There's Malcolm X, you know? There's like animal -- no, I don't know if there was ever animal print. But there was like, you know, red and gold touches everywhere. And it's a very inviting, you know...
Amaka: Kaz talked about Kai decorating.
Irini: Yes, that was all Kai. That was all Kai. We had very -- we were really fortunate to have people that were experienced. Kai was one of them. Oh my God.
Amaka: Well, I'm going to ask you about kind of the elders and you know, kind of mentors next.
Irini: Yeah, yeah. So it was -- I mean, it was very rigorous. So the culture is very odd, right? And you mentioned this earlier. So you have this sort of government space that has very particular, like, business it conducts. At the same time you have this formal/informal cadre of folks that are coming in to change the world. And those are happening at the same time, at the same place. You have students in and out attending classes and being, you know, stimulated intellectually in their classes, information that they're then bringing back. So the culture, yeah, there's a lot -- you know, there's a lot of breaking bread. There's a lot of birthdays being celebrated. There's Secret Santa that's happening. There are also budgets and number crunching and minutes being taken and paid staff and negotiating, you know, the space between -- the space of coming into adulthood all at the same time and feeling very responsible for the world and at the same time not always knowing how to nurture yourself and your peers in that process. And so, we were very hard on ourselves. And we expected -- you know, we did expect people to be there until 1:00 AM if something wanted to get done. And I don't know that we ever -- we were ever good at saying, "You should go home." And so, it's a very rigorous emotional/mental/physical space to be in. On the one hand it's home. And it's the home that many people didn't have outside of that space. And at the same time it's -- and I don't -- you know, I was going to say "abusive." But I don't think it was -- I don't think we harmed anybody in the process. But there was a lot of selfless and selfish stuff happening in that space.
Amaka: Right. You know what's interesting is I find that, you know, with SLAM!, just with whatever organization, I mean, now where people are starting to get language around, like, self-care and all of that. But you know, so often that's not very present, you know? It's like we work until we collapse, you know? So it seems as if that was, you know, present there.
Irini: And it wasn't -- you know, I don't think we were thinking about it like -- we were not interested in doing this ten years from now. We have to solve this now. There is no a month from now. There is no a year from now. This is not something we're building strategy around so that we can build steps toward, you know, ten years from now having that seat in the chancellor's office. That's not how we were -- we need to solve this now.
Amaka: There was immediacy.

Irini: Yeah. And everything was immediate [01:00:00] because the way that open admissions -- I know you're focusing on open admissions. But everything was that pertinent.
Amaka: Yeah, you know, I'm focusing. I mean, you know, I'm supposed to be focusing on open admissions. But I think that, you know, I do want to think about SLAM! in its totality. And I know that so much of the work was not just open admissions. It was connected to everything, you know? So you know, don't feel like you have to limit your scope to open admissions. What else? It was interesting. When I was talking to Kaz, he was -- and I think he's reflected a lot on this. So I think this is why he did it in this way. But he was talking about the sensuality of SLAM!. So he was saying it was from, you know, Kai and the way she decorated the office to, like, you know, the fact that a lot of people were, you know, as young people do, coming into themselves, coming out, you know, a lot of folks were dating each other. And there was interesting interpersonal relationships. Can you speak to some of that?
Irini: Mm-hmm. Am I blushing?
Amaka: You don't have to -- you know, you don't have to name. Like, some people were out here, like, naming names. I was like, that's a little too much information. You don't have to do that. But you know, just generally you can speak to that.
Irini: Yeah, yeah, and all of that was happening. We were young. It was the first time a lot of us are away from home. Yeah, so back to the aesthetic, yeah, there's definitely, like, powerful women. Some people are turned on by that, and some people run. So the people that ran were not our people. I'm not trying to convert anybody. Yeah, I mean, there were a lot of -- the space was exactly that. The reason that it was rich is because of that. We are each coming into ourselves personally, sexually, in our relationships, how we're treating each other. If you have an interpersonal relationship, if you have a romantic relationship with somebody, and you're also expected to do XYZ, and you have -- you know, your political ideologies differ, well guess what? Everybody's feeling all of that tension. And so all of that is present. And all of the -- you know, all of the stuff that comes with being sexually open, open relationships but so-and-so used to be with so-and-so, he's cool being in an open relationship and she's not, you know, you're feeling all of that. And so, in many ways it's an experiential, experimental space. We support each as much as possible. And sometimes we just need to go. And when you go, when you go it's hard because you feel like you're abandoning work at the same time. So yeah, a whole lot going on. But there was always music playing. There was a whole lot of, like, Love Jones CDs happening. Yeah, food, music, a lot of love, and a lot of struggle within that space.
Amaka: Can you speak to the importance and the role of just kind of elders or, like, mentors in that space? So like, a lot of people have mentioned Kai. Pretty much everybody has mentioned her as, you know, being really significant, her partner, Ashanti Alston. Some people have mentioned Esperanza Martell. So can you...
Irini: [Panama?], have -- Panama, has he come up?
Amaka: Yeah, I haven't heard that yet. So just, you know, mention whoever.
Irini: I'm going to mention something, somebody, who is not at all an elder, but Kim Wade. Kim Wade was not an elder. But guess what? She had experiences she shared with us. And so I'm going to put her in that rank because she deserves kind of the -- being credited for having enough life experience to make that office work. So a few things. All of the people that you just mentioned had a political savvy. They understood. They saw us for the moment that they were in. But they were beyond that moment. And so, there was a lot that they can share with us in terms of life experience. So they were the ones that talked strategy, not for today, for tomorrow, [01:05:00] but for a more global. And it wasn't just -- and they were the folks that said, you know, you don't just share successes. You share -- I won't call them failures, but you share your challenges, what you tried that wasn't successful, you know. And then you get -- you're not the first people doing this. You're not that special. Guess what? And that was important. That was important for them to bring that in. So Kai was important because she brought in -- I mean, she was a Black Panther, right? So she brought in a particular political perspective, language. She was the one that wrote. I don't know if you've come across anything that she's written about our work. But everything from a project that we wanted to get them -- so, part of what is interesting about SLAM! and being in that office is that we have staff. And then we have folks that are giving everything and just living there because it's part of their own psychosis like it was mine. So there's a lot to navigate there. So there was project -- what did we call them? Project -- some staff that we brought on for a particular project. So Kim Wade came in as that. Kai was an office manager for student government. Really? That's not at all the capacity that -- that's not all that she functioned as. But that was her paid work. But she came there not to be an office assistant or director or whatever her title was. But she really nurtured all of us in doing this work and being mindful about how we negotiate those relationships, because if you're not negotiating those relationships, you can't move this work forward. So yeah, it was important to have the -- it sounds simple. But when you get a thumbs up from somebody that has that experience and that knows this, it's invaluable. And not to say that we were dragging our feet, but to have full see and bring the perspective of, like,

yes, go, do it, or red flag, you've done it this way. It didn't work. Why are you doing this again? Or have you considered X, Y and Z? Those perspectives were really important. And they were mentoring relationships at a time where we really needed some support. That's not part of the job description. That is something that they brought in. Yeah, and then, so what do you do when you're questioning your own sexuality? Where does that fall into the conversation, the political conversation? Is that something that I'm experiencing? Is that something that I need to share? Am I accountable to folks for that when I don't know how I'm negotiating this? So having elders in that space was important. I mention Panama because Panama and Espy were both essential in doing security trainings for us, so teaching us how to teach other students how to negotiate that space when we're out there doing civil disobediences, anything from, like, you know, rallies and -- so, those two were really important for that. And then also for women, I mean, Espy, I think, was really -- and Kai both were really -- I think for the men, having Ashanti and Panama was important for role models. And then for the women, it's just always good to have those male and female dynamics. But yeah, we had people that had done this, that we can see them, and that were still doing it. And it was important to their work, and that were committed to sharing their experiences with generations, with our generation. And I think that is something that we all took seriously. And I hope that -- I mean, I know that some of the youth development -- youth development. This is my foundation language coming through. Training other youth -- younger youth, high school youth -- came out of the investment that those folks made to us [01:10:00]. And I hope that we each carried that same commitment to sharing these lessons forward.

Amaka: Right. Can you speak to any significant -- I mean, I guess other than what you've spoken to about open admissions, any significant events, issues, you know, that you remember working on in SLAM!? I don't know if you were at the Republican National Convention or anything like that.

Irini: Mm-mm.

Amaka: Okay. So but any kind of significant, like, events, rallies, anything that sticks out to you?

Irini: So there were -- I mean, there were two. The day-to-day matters. But then there were things that supersede this stuff. So doing work around Mumia's campaign was that. So one of the things that I helped do was plan a conference for Critical Resistance East. And that came after going to Critical Resistance West and meeting folks at SOUL at that time and making those connections to Berkeley and to the work that STORM was doing. There was a huge action that we did at the Liberty Bell. And that was also connected to Mumia's case. And the training that -- I mean, I couldn't have done that without all of the training that had followed from SLAM!. And then, there was a time -- as a lot of us grew through SLAM! into different parts of ourselves, there were a lot of international travel that we then did. So I went -- there was an international delegation that Kai, Sabrine, and I participated in in Iraq around bringing attention to US post-sanctions -- UN post-sanctions, really. And then after that -- but still very much connected to that work because it was all the same people -- was the huge immigration rally that happed in New York City. And this was the date that I couldn't remember when I was talking to Suzy. I'm not even going to -- it was February 14th, and I don't remember the year.

Amaka: It was in New York or in DC?

Irini: It was in New York.

Amaka: I don't know that. Well, maybe I do. Anyway...

Irini: Yeah. Yeah, so those -- I mean, those are moments that, you know, that stick out.

Amaka: Okay. What was SLAM!'s relationship to organizations outside of Hunter, community organizations? You know, I ask that because, you know, we kind of spoke to this a little bit the last time that we met. But SLAM! to me seems like it's really emerging at this time in which a lot of organizations that have kind of become, you know, these nonprofit like, well-known community organizations in New York or wherever else, a lot of those kind of seem to be coming into emergence at this time or, you know, maybe a little bit afterwards. And it seemed as if SLAM! was really connected to organizations outside of just, you know, student organizations. They were really connected to, like, work going on in communities outside of Hunter. You know, I've heard talking to a lot of people there saying that, you know, the student resource center, there was community members in there photocopying things for their own meetings, you know? So can you speak to that, and as well as -- I'm thinking more about kind of the local relationships. But you know, as you mentioned, SLAM! did have a relationship with STORM. You guys are going on international delegations, you know, Iraq. You went to Mexico. So can you speak to SLAM!'s relationship to other organizations?

Irini: Yeah. And again, I think those are also very informal because each of us coming in are part of a community. And so, the reason that we're finding SLAM! or that we're finding some commonality with the folks there [01:15:00] are because we're coming from a very particular perspective. And so, yeah, there's a lot of alignment that is happening because of that. So on the one hand SLAM! has this, like, almost -- you know, this energy, this energy that folks are tapping into. But it's also a particular moment in New York City. I mean, I mentioned quality of life earlier. To me, that is the -- that's the -- what ties all of New York City together at that

time. So the folks that feel like there is cleaning up that needs to get done so that I can live better, and then there are the recipients of what those policies -- the effects of what those policies look like in actual living communities. And so, yeah, there's a lot of work happening in New York City around those issues, everything from, like, access to transportation and healthcare. Housing was a big, big one. The NYPD is always something of contention. And I can speak personally where I kind of gravitated towards was work around prison expansion. To me, there was a direct link between the resources coming out of the education system and going into the prison system. I saw that clear as day. And so, that's where I focused my work. So with organizations like Critical Resistance, the Prison Moratorium Project, MXGM was sharing a space with PMP at the time, and then being part of citywide coalitions that those organizations then participated in. And so, but the way that I had a relationship with those particular groups, other folks did work around a myriad of other stuff. But yeah, I think it was energizing for us to be part of organizations that were based in communities. And it was energizing for them to have -- to them the resources were not important. It was the people. It was the fire that we brought to their events. So yeah, a really, really exciting moment to be living in, and a lot of, like, birthing of new things, right, just a lot.

Amaka: Yeah. Why do you think SLAM!, like, ended when it did? This was after you had already left. But on one hand SLAM! lasted very long for a student organization. You know, student organizations are notoriously, you know, a cycle. You know, people are in and out. So in some ways it seems as if SLAM! lasted kind of, you know, a long time for a student organization. On the other hand you know, what do you think were the factors that led to it ending when it did?

Irini: So a few things. I think the core members of SLAM! remained consistent for a long time. And that was important because in a student organization, with the amount of turnover that you have, having continuity in terms of people is important. The challenge that we spoke about earlier is that there is leadership development but that that leadership development, you know, has a line that it doesn't cross. And so, I don't know that the core leadership ever expanded to a place that would allow SLAM! to have the continuity that it spoke about. And so, the work, we were very committed to training folks and to doing political education. But I think that when those core leaders stepped down -- and it's not realistic to think that anybody can be in a student organization for life. It's not what -- it just doesn't function that way. We each individually struggled with what's next. I don't know that we each individually struggled as much with -- I don't know that that's true. [01:20:00] We probably all lost sleep over it, but what SLAM!'s future would be, because the expectation is that this is student led and that those students coming up next would lead it. But it doesn't work that way. And so, yeah, it's not enough to just say, you know, I did an action with this person, I had a cup of coffee with that person, and I had a political conversation with that person, and expect it to become something that it's not. So there were a lot of factors. There was a lot of repression on campus. The way that we became savvy, the administration became savvy. I mean, ultimately we could say that it was something as simple as losing the student election, losing the space because electronic voting. Essentially, that's what happened. We lost -- to have access to those spaces, we would have to be voted into government. When you're no longer voted into government, you no longer have access to those resources. I don't think it was as simple as that. I think that would be a mechanical, technical answer to that question. I think we were burned out. I think that sustaining something that's that dynamic takes a lot, a personal toll. Maintaining those interpersonal relationships takes a lot of work. And that is not something that the folks that were doing it could sustain. And doing all of that while also training new folks was also not something that we were equipped to do. And so, I think all of those factors contributed.

Amaka: Who would you describe as the core for those? I guess it pretty much seemed to be the same core for most of it.

Irini: The core? Yeah, there was a core. There was a core. Rachèl and Lenina were part of the core. Sandra Barros was part of the core. Jed and Chris were part of the core. John Kim came in and out of the core. I'm trying to think if there were other -- if there are others that are, you know, that I feel like are as strong. And again, I think if anybody was as consistent throughout the whole thing it would be Rachèl. Lenina came in and out. Sandra came in and out. John Kim came in and out. Jed came in and out. Chris came in and out. And I think Rachèl was probably the most consistent member. And at other times other folks came in and out. Kaz was definitely -- I don't know. I don't know. I want to say Kaz is part of it, part of that inner core, although -- yeah, he's probably a little bit -- he's in the circumference, perhaps. There are a lot of folks on the circumference, right on the cusp there, yeah.

Amaka: So I'm not sure exactly, you know, which specific people donated all the stuff to Tamiment.. But it seems as if SLAM! was aware, to a certain extent, about the importance of documentation. Can you speak to that? You know, Chris has written a lot of stuff. You know, a lot of people have saved stuff in their personal possession as well as given it away to the NYU.

Irini: It was important. I think it was important, and it was conscious. I think a lot of it -- Kai was definitely one of the people that was central to why we understood it organizationally as something that was important, even

though we weren't an organization in that way. I know I was very mindful about -- we were all very mindful about what we put on paper and what we don't. But I always knew that it was important to leave documents. I have my own archive of all, in triplicate, probably. We all understood that we were living in a particular moment. It's hard when you're living in that moment to know that it's an important moment. [01:25:00] Sometimes you know that in retrospect. But we knew it. We knew that this was not the experience of everyone and that it was a particular moment, and that it was one to be seized. We could have -- in retrospect we probably would have done a lot more. And there are always the people that are more into the doing than the note taking. Yeah, but there is a sophistication in the way that we operated. Sometimes it was trial by fire. Most of the times it was trial by fire. But there was a lot of grounding and anchoring in our practices also.

Amaka: How do you think SLAM! influenced or shaped your politically, like after SLAM!?

Irini: I mean, SLAM! is my political education. I came in with certain concepts. I was open to it. But SLAM! is where I became politicized. It's where I understood that I'm a radical person with radical ideas. And you know what? And it was not scary. And it was okay. And it was, in fact, what we all strived to be. And perhaps we weren't radical enough. And so, there aren't many spaces that are that special and that exist, right, for us to be able to nurture that and grow it. But yeah, I mean, it taught me how to be human and myself and the person that I want to be, both in terms of my practices but then also the community that I want to form around me. And a lot of it was taught with what I don't want to do again and what I don't want my interpersonal relationships to look like. That all happened there. That's where I met my husband, had my SLAM! babies. They'll always be SLAM! babies. Yeah.

Amaka: How has the political work that you've done after SLAM! -- do you see it in relationship to any of the stuff in SLAM!? Do you see it coming out of any of that? I mean, can you describe kind of the political work that you've done since?

Irini: So when I left SLAM! I realized that if we're going to be able to do this and do it in a long-term way -- so, a few things, a few realizations in my few short years at SLAM!. We're not actually going to solve these problems tomorrow. No matter how much energy we put into this work, unless it's sustained energy, it's almost counterproductive. So I left with the understanding that building capacity for ourselves individually, for the people that we work with, and then having an understanding about why this is important to certain folks and how we align are all important conversations. The relationships that I built then I continue to nurture now. And it goes beyond the love that I have for them. But they're strategic alignments and relationships that continue. So on the one hand that political grounding was important. And then as I continued to work, I think some of the militancy that we had continues to follow me. But then the compassion has also grown for the people that do this work because I understand how difficult it is and how important it is and how it's not something that you just do for a day. You make a commitment to it. So I think and I hope that I continue to be a resource for people that continue to organize and be activists and rabble-rousers. And you know, don't allow business that is counterproductive to the flourishing of communities to remain, right? I -- and I've also been very mindful about [01:30:00] what my contribution can be and then how I can have as full a life that is as balanced as possible in doing it because there was no balance then. And that's something that I work for every day because my tendency is to burn out. I know that that's my default. And I know that being critical is easy. But putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, being a mentor to someone, just being present, is as important in the long term as possible. And so, yeah, I don't build alliances for the day anymore. And I try to understand the way I navigate the world, one, to live my politics but then, two, to understand it in a progression. And the way that then we understood our work to be aligned with students, and that this is not about us, it's about the future, that carries with me. So now it's not about me. It's about the future of my kids. But it is also about me and living in the communities that feel right to me, where I want to raise my family. So I don't know if that was ever -- you know, there was never that political education. But that was the lived experience that came out of that.

Amaka: Is there anything that you think hasn't been said that should be further emphasized, anything that wasn't covered in terms of, you know, your answers to these questions or any of my questions? I don't have any more questions.

Irini: There's nothing burning. There's nothing burning. I've just been really -- just to reflect back to you that I've been really happy that this is -- that we did enough. We did something that was worthy enough to be documented, and it is. And so I think your work is really important. The work that Suzy is doing is really important. And sharing out those lessons, I think, is a commitment that all of us had and continue to have. So yeah, I'm just excited to be able to see this and also to understand. I think the reason why your work is important is because of all of those elements, of how student organizing happens outside of this particular example. But yeah, I guess the one thing that I do want to leave with is that we did talk about SLAM!'s understanding of affirmative action and why that was important, of open admissions and why it was important. And all of us are now -- not all of us, but many of us are now coming into being parents and having to face these situations with our children. And so,

the rallies that are happening in Chicago right now are felt very deeply. And so, there's -- I think I've been very proud that I was part of that moment, but also understanding that this is, you know...
Amaka: [Still fired?]
Irini: Yeah, education that is based on the test, on testing, that has lost its soul, its sexiness, its artfulness, and its purpose, really. Our struggle -- I mean, that understanding is going to live within us. But we're also responsible to educating a whole other generation for combating it. So it goes on.
Amaka: Yes, it does. Thank you so much.
Irini: Thank you.

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