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Interview with Mariano Muñoz
Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: Identification, question. So, can you state your name?

Mariano Muñoz: Mariano Munoz.

Amaka: And your age?

Mariano: I'm 33.

Amaka: Your race?

Mariano: Latino.

Amaka: Your gender?

Mariano: Male.

Amaka: Your sexual orientation?

Mariano: Straight.

Amaka: Marital status?

Mariano: Engaged.

Amaka: Congratulations. Children?

Mariano: No.

Amaka: Also feel free, if you don't want to answer a question for any particular reason, feel free to skip it.

Mariano: Sure.

Amaka: So, where were you born and raised?

Mariano: Born and raised in Lima, in Peru. And I moved to

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the States when I was 13.

Amaka: How would you describe the neighborhood, or the region, in which you grew up in?

Mariano: It's a, you know, big metropolis, capital of Peru, from what I've heard, I haven't been around, except for Colombia, pretty much the same in Latin America, very centralized country, eight million people in the city. And all the surrounding areas, shanty towns on the outskirts. Really fast paced city, very old city, four hundred years old. Very fast, the house that I grew up with it was in the outskirts of Lima, say maybe, Coney Island or Flushing or something like that. Thirty years ago it was semi-rural, we didn't have phones, power was all right, water was kind of scattered. It was pretty removed from an urban area, although we commuted to the city every day for school and for my parents' jobs. It was nice to be away, I had a cow growing up, chickens, rabbits, things like that. But also, you know, we're connected to the city, every day for school and because of working.

Amaka: How would you describe your parents politically growing up?

Mariano: They were both leftist. Both leftist, their own

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political awakening wasn't from their parents, like mine is, like mine was. So, when they got to college, that's when they started getting political. My dad was a young communist for a short period of time. And then, after they graduated from college they worked for the current leftist government that was in place. There was a military coup, but there it was a leftist military, kind of like Chavez. When they graduated, that's when the coup happened, so they jumped on that. And they did pretty good work for about five years in the northern part of the country to implement some of the reforms that were going on, like agrarian reforms and things like that, land reforms. And then you know, there was another coup, '72, '73?. This time it was right-wing military. That's when they stepped back from public life, and my dad became a self-made business man. He did everything, from like selling cheese, to like running a liquor store, to like selling and buying used cars, like old cars. And my mom had six kids, so that was her occupation after that. They kind of withdrew from being active politically.

Amaka: So, how do you think, you can speak to the ways it had or did not, in which ways do you think your

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parents politically may have shaped you?

Mariano: Hundred percent, for sure. They were pretty left, I mean, a lot of our first names, are popular lefty heroes, like Che, Ernesto, and Cesar, Peruvian leftist poet, José Carlos, Peruvian Marxist from the early twentieth century. They were pretty lefty, you know? Not active, really. They never belonged to the communist party, they never belonged to the left party of Peru, but they had a lot of connections. Growing up, it was one of the things I don't remember, I don't ever remember being politicized. It was just something, like air.

Amaka: It was natural.

Mariano: It was very natural. The way we talked about Peruvian reality, but putting it into a world context. Talking about the States, and this and that, and imperialism, and colonialism, and history. [00:05:00] I don't remember having a political awakening. Although here, yes. Many, many years later, I do remember becoming active, when I met SLAM Folks at Hunter College. It wasn't a mental thing, it was a physical thing, because I became active.

Amaka: So, when did you come to the U.S.?

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Mariano: In '92. I was 13.

Amaka: So, you were 13 when you came to the United States. What was that transition like? Did you come with your family, or?

Mariano: It was kind of a partitioned immigration. My dad and my older brother, they came here first in a very precarious situation and voyage. And then, my older brothers came one at a time. And then I was the last one to come with my mother and my sister. It was very drastic, very shocking. Aside from the fact that we were raised being very critical, to use a light word of U.S. imperialism and colonialism and all that, and we pretty much understood how the world works from a very early age. And then, to just announce that we're moving to the States, you know? Of course, we understood it was for economic reasons, and we have family here from previous immigrations. The move itself was very quick. We fooled the Embassy into giving us a tourist visa, and we packed up in a matter of days, we packed up and left. I was very happy, because I was going to be reunited with my dad and my brother that I hadn't seen for two years, and the rest of my brothers as well. So, I was very happy to leave, but

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all my classmates were very sad. It was a pretty hard week for everybody there, it was a small school, people really knew each other, and so it was hard for them. If you see the airport pictures, you see scores of kids bawling, crying. And I'm just like, I'm all good, I'm going to go reunite with my family. From that moment, that was the beginning of the duality as an immigrant. In my case, an undocumented immigrant, you have your persona, you have how you present yourself, and then there is, you know, the other side of you, you know what I'm saying? From that moment, in

retrospect, that was the beginning of having two things going on at once. I'm happy that I'm leaving, but then again I'm super sad. I'm somewhat sad because I'm seeing them cry and this and that, and I know I'm not going to come back anytime soon. I couldn't really tell them, because it's a shady situation, it's just a, "We gotta go soon," you know? So, it was very short time to process all this. I had a very, very pleasant time on the airplane. I didn't have to go through any of the migration that many people have to go through, through the border, boats, things like that. It was a pretty easy flight from Lima to Miami. The way up north was a little trickier. The first

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night we landed in Miami was the night Hurricane Andrew hit, you're probably too young to remember.

Amaka: Yeah, but I know about Hurricane Andrew.

Mariano: Hurricane Andrew hit Florida in '92, August 24, it was the biggest hurricane they had had in years, the destruction was... As soon as we landed, I think we were one of the last few flights to land that day, and they closed up the airports. I remember seeing that part of Miami, and then leaving through the storm, the whole night, 16 hours, staying up the whole night until the storm went by. And the next day, we came out, it's all destroyed, this and that, you couldn't even fly. In the end, we ended up staying there for a week and taking the bus up here. I got a mini Americana tour, through Georgia, Baltimore, D.C., some of the restaurants, things like that, on the bus. And then we got here.

Amaka: When you moved to New York, what neighborhoods did you live in? [00:10:00]

Mariano: Originally, I went to high school in New Jersey. Patterson, New Jersey, is one of the biggest enclaves for Peruvians in the States, Patterson, Chicago, Miami. So we moved to Patterson, lived in Patterson for a month, then we

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moved to a suburban area around Patterson, mostly for the high school, Patterson high schools are notorious, they make movies about it, East Side High. The Morgan Freeman movie?

Amaka: Yeah. (laughs)

Mariano: That wasn't really an option. I went to high school in a pretty white, suburban area, in Wayne, New Jersey.

Amaka: What was that experience like?

Mariano: It was pretty rough. It was rough. I'm kind of social, but it was rough from being part of the group to just being like a mute. I couldn't communicate, I didn't even speak the language whatsoever. I was undocumented as well, so that was another dimension to those days. It was rough, it was rough. I adapted, I guess, quicker, than some other of my siblings. Learned the language quickly. I always liked to study, focus on school, things like that. It was hard. It was hard not having people to hang out with, not make friends, at the beginning, the language, I had a lot of homework every day, things like that.

Amaka: Do you think that that period of being in that particular high school, and like you were saying, experiencing a kind of transition from familiar to

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unfamiliar, and being undocumented and learning the language, do you think that that period may have shaped you politically in any way? Of course, identity wise, I'm sure, but --

Mariano: I think my politics, politics to me were straight as always. I always thought, as a kid, I always thought I knew what was up, in terms of why are things as messed up as they are, or why things are like that. I was middle class in Peru, so I kept up with the American horizon, the TV, the propaganda, I was pretty familiar with American culture, but very critical, of course. I guess high school just brought it home a little more. I was very repressed politically in high school. I didn't talk politics with my friends, not until senior year, maybe. Junior, senior year, when I started actually having friends to talk to, I could communicate. Mostly, senior year I would just speak my mind in my circle of friends. It was always dismissed as nonsense, some of the kids paid attention. I remember in high school I joined the student elections one day. I went home and I made a flyer about how we should support one of the candidates, this guy named Boris, because

he wasn't a preppy, popular kid, he was a very studious kid from Russia, he was very smart. When we talked we had more

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or less similar ideas about society, things like that. I remember going home, and I think it was my junior year, I'm making a flyer and posting it around the hallways, my own little secret action, how we should support Boris because he's not part of the elite, or some shit like that, some makeshift propaganda flyers in a high school election. Anyway, that was one action I did in high school. It was very repressed, hidden, not very transformative.

Amaka: What work did you parents do once you got to the States?

Mariano: I mean, what didn't they do. It was tough. Very tough. They were both lawyers in Lima, working class. My dad mostly. My dad growing up was poor. My grandfather drove a cab his whole life, so he was able to save up some money and put him through school, put him through law school. My mom had it a little better, middle class. [00:15:00] They also paid for her schooling, so they were able to go to law school on a scholarship, actually, both of them. They paid half, or whatever. And, so, you know, I forgot the question.

Amaka: The type of work they did in the States.

Mariano: Oh, right. So, then, moving here, it was

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drastic. My dad works in restaurants, my mom is a domestic, and they hadn't done it for other people their whole lives. They worked hard, all the time, but never for somebody else, as a domestic, or as a dishwasher. So that was hard for them, very hard for them. My parents are very proud people. Growing up, I thought they were superheroes, talking back to cops. Because you know, they had the education and the know-how, how to navigate. There wasn't anybody that I thought my parents couldn't stand up to, from police, the principal, to going to do some paperwork, this and that. They always were able to navigate all these situations, and here, it was complete opposite. Undocumented, they didn't speak the language. My mom spoke a little bit more, working odd jobs, it was very hard for them. And for me, too, I guess. Part of my process growing up, feelings of embarrassment from your parents, you blame yourself, it takes a while to process all these things, and try to understand decisions that I took as a teenager. Not be too hard on yourself, but understand they were wrong, and they probably hurt. Probably hurt my parents sometimes. It was tough, it was tough on the whole family. And we had it okay, our experience is better than

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most. But it was rough for us.

Amaka: So, you went to Hunter?

Mariano: Yeah. I started at Hunter.

Amaka: Did you go to Hunter straight out of high school or did you take time off?

Mariano: No, in high school I didn't apply, I did apply... I applied during the summer, I didn't apply during the spring of my senior year because I was afraid that my un-documentation was going to come up. So I graduated and then I applied on my own throughout the summer. I got into William Paterson University, which is in Wayne, I started financing myself to go to school, I think I did a year at William Paterson. And then I went away to the West Coast for like, ten months, in L.A. I think I was missing the Pacific, so I just went the other way for a few months, took classes at Santa Monica College. I came back to William Paterson University for another semester, and after that I transferred to Hunter. So, I came into Hunter when I was 19, 20.

Amaka: Why did you choose Hunter to transfer into?

Mariano: In that time, I was very interested in anthropology, and Hunter had a pretty good anthropology

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department, mostly on the physical side, biological side, which also interested me. I had a brother who was going to school in the Upper East Side, scholarship up there, he had a dorm there, so you know, I figured... He told me about Hunter, I think he might have been seeing someone, his partner at that time, I think she was going to Hunter, something like that. They told me. Ever since I could, I

started coming to New York, as a teenager. I wanted to come to New York eventually. So, as soon as I could, I pulled up my GPA in New Jersey, and I transferred, knowing I was going to be closer to my brother, I was very close to where he was, and knowing that Hunter had a pretty good anthropology department, and overall, it was probably the best CUNY school. You know, that's pretty much it.

Amaka: So what years were you at Hunter?

Mariano: I was at Hunter fall of '99, spring 2000, probably took off a semester, came back, up until the end of 2001, 2002. On and off.

Amaka: And did you graduate from there or did you leave?

Mariano: No. I've actually been to five CUNY schools, and I'm graduating from John Jay now.

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Amaka: Okay. [00:20:00] So, at the time at which you entered Hunter, how would you characterize yourself politically? Would it be the same that you've described up until now?

Mariano: Yeah, yeah. As a child I wanted to be a guerrilla fighter, leftist guerrilla. That was the dream. So, those were always my politics, in that sense, that kind of radicalism. As I got older, I became a little more nonviolent, thinking arms maybe wasn't the way to go. So at Hunter College, I just remember seeing all these postings about political activity. That was news to me, I kind of knew, but not really, I knew about the Black Panthers, but that was way back, I knew about the Young Lords, but that was way back, I didn't know there was a little movement going around with people that maybe thought like me. I just had no idea. I remember being in school that fall, '99, I remember just seeing the SLAM posters, SLAM, tuition fights, this and that. And the way they presented their stuff, it was pretty good. It wasn't dogmatic, it wasn't the socialist party, the this, the that. It was just students doing what is fair. They didn't worry about dogma, theories, things like that. I

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just came into the office, I started helping out. It just attracted me, the way they used the right action, the protests, this and that, the sit ins, I started learning about the history of SLAM. They'd been around for about three years already. I was like, "Yeah, man, I like this."

Amaka: Do you remember, I guess before we get into SLAM stuff, so you were an anthropology major when you were there?

Mariano: Yeah.

Amaka: Do you remember, and it's okay if you don't, any classes, or professors, or anything you remember or think that they were significant or anything like that?

Mariano: In college, right?

Amaka: Yeah, at Hunter.

Mariano: Not so much professors. They knew their stuff within their disciplines, you know? And I wasn't part of the Puerto Rican, African American studies or anything like that, I was just an anthropology major in the beginning. So I didn't take any social justice classes or anything like that. I was taking just like cultural anthropology classes, all very focused on anthropology. I was very interested in academics and linguistics and this and the

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other. I mean I had one professor, Harriet Taber, she was a really, really smart feminist, and she really opened up a whole path of access and resources to read more about feminism. I didn't really know that much about that, I mean I have my own feminist views, but I hadn't been exposed to any of the literature. She was very good at that, she was very good at presenting. She taught Intro to Linguistics, but within that, she gave us a little taste of her class that she created, which was called Language, Sex, and Gender. It was the class that she actually created, and it was about language and gender, so we studied all the feminist from the past couple centuries to the more recent ones. It was really interesting; it was really interesting how she presented the mix between these three subjects. And she was pretty radical, she was pretty radical in her approach. I remember, it wasn't like a, it was politics, but it wasn't left or right politics, it was feminist politics in that sense. There was one guy that approached me, I remember one day I was having lunch. He must have been a

teacher, I never got his name, and he's the one who gave me the flyer for the Brecht forum. He was like, "Hey man, what's up?" And I was like, "Hey, what's up?" I must

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have been reading something, I don't know. Maybe he saw me with flyers, some SLAM flyers. He was like, "Do you know about the Brecht forum?" And I was like, "No, no." I brought the flyer home I think, I think my older brother had already been to the Brecht forum or something like that. and I remember that was the first time I heard about the Brecht forum before I moved to where they are now, way back. But he wasn't like a professor. Like I said, my politics came from my parents, way back.

Amaka: Can you speak to, I guess, both at SLAM and in the city, what you remember the political climate being when you were at Hunter. [00:25:00]

Mariano: I thought it was very vibrant. I didn't know any better. SLAM's heyday was a little before.

Amaka: Because you came in right after open admissions ended?

Mariano: Yeah, came in in '99, when they were striking back. We were feeling the backlash. I didn't know, I thought we were pushing forward a lot. But we were really receiving the backlash from the previous two, three years. But I mean this is me thinking in retrospect, not a 20-year-old in '99. So like, it was interesting times, it was

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the end of the century, there were elections coming up, at that time we were talking about DEO, Board of Trustees, it was one of the first protests that I went to. I pulled one of my brothers into that, he's a musician. So you know, I was making ties within his music, and we put some shows together to raise awareness, and some of the SLAM folks actually came to those in Queens. So, it was, to me, it was live or die. Life or death. It was an everyday thing. I guess that's the urgency that you feel when you're at that age. Things take a while, you know. I kind of threw myself into the work, doing menial tasks, flyer, doing things like that. On the side, doing my own thing, with producing music shows, and my brother on parallel to whatever we were doing in Hunter. Just raising awareness with whatever was happening, like protests, or teaching, or whatever was happening in admissions, we were talking in classes, things like that. A lot of the SLAM people that I met, I met because I jumped up and I started talking about the protest in front of the class, and they were like, "Oh, yeah." Funny story, one of my good friends for life, Liam, he was a member of SLAM already, and I was doing my rap at the end of one of my classes that we have in common, the

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feminist class. Must have been the Intro to Linguistics first, because I took the feminist class after that. With the same teacher. Anyway, so I asked for permission to plug in the protest, and I'm talking about the protest or whatever, and Liam just walks up to me and stands next to me, and he's Irish. So, I'm like "What the fuck? I'm doing my thing here? White boy comes up, tries to take my time." And then he kind of spoke a little bit before the end, and then we broke, and we were working out, and he introduced himself, like, "Hey, man, what's up." And I was like "Hey." He was like, "Good job. Next time, try to remember you're from SLAM, you're from student government, people know who you are." And I said, "Well, I'm not. I don't belong to any group, I'm just, read the flyer." He was like, "Oh, okay, we have meetings." This and the other. Little by little we started gravitating toward each other. But yeah, it was pretty tense during that time. Like the protests, and things that we were doing. Then I started to get to know all the people there. Came into the space, came to a few meetings. He was like a [gaston? bastion?], knowledge that these things existed, in New York. I mean, having gone to high school in suburban New Jersey, mostly

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white, I didn't know that there were people who were progressive radical, and they were nuts. They were unpacking, they weren't communists, they were just political people, forward thinking and

inclusive. Very inclusive. Honest and committed, and very diverse. The diversity of the group really attracted me. That was interesting.

Amaka: What was your understanding of how SLAM came to develop in the first place?

Mariano: So, it used to be called Student Power Movement.

Amaka: SPM.

Mariano: Yeah. 15 cats, trying to do some work. That was before SLAM actually got together. My understanding is, when shit hit the fan about admissions, people started having city wide meetings. Hunter was pretty active, and then Brooklyn College was pretty active, Suzy [Subways] was doing work at Brooklyn College, people, Eric, were doing stuff at city college. [00:30:00] People were doing stuff at Hunter with Rochelle, Sander, Sassa, Kazembe. I think a city wide meeting, that's when they made a city wide coalition, that's when they called themselves SLAM, I think. That's what I understand. They were pretty open and explicit about their mission, which was keeping CUNY

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open, keeping tuition low, and making the historical connections of why it's not free anymore. How it was free until it became mostly students of color, when, and this and that, and the struggles before, and when they first tried to shut it down in '69. But then the students rose up, they took over the buildings, and then they kind of backed off. They kept on cutting, one way or another, until now.

Amaka: How would you describe the structure of SLAM? Like you were mentioning before, regarding this city wide coalition and there being different chapters. I guess I'll just read this briefly, because it's about change over time, which is what I'm asking. This is '95, '96, when SLAM first started getting together. It was decided by student activists who started the Student Liberation Action Movement, a new structure that would guarantee that 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 campus participation to invited groups. They also require that each delegation be at least half women and half people of color. So I ask that question because that sounds very structured in a way that I don't think

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necessarily continued the entire length of SLAM. What do you remember the structure being like, in terms of, how meetings were conducted, the demographics of who was involved, those types of things?

Mariano: It seemed pretty organic, it seemed like they respected people that did work. It was pretty open, but not really. You kind of have to be invited to a meeting. They weren't secret meetings, or anything like that. But you kind of have to walk in with somebody, somebody knows you. I remember being there for my first meeting, I think Rameiro, when I met [Sandro Ramos?], she was like, "You have to meet Ramiero." Because Ramiero was an anthropology major, doing his work in Peru, actually. Machu Picchu. So we had that in common, we got to talk, he invited me to the meeting, whatever. And then I remember coming to the meeting, just observing, trying to feel the people out. And it was very organized way of talking, very respectful, you know, these are the facilitators, these are the others, people listen to each other, it was very diverse, it was mostly women, mostly women of color led. There were some older folks, like [Kae Bower?] was there, and [Christopher Gunderson?], [Chris Dave?], back in the day. They were a

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little older, they seemed to be more experienced, especially Kae. But you know, the young ones were just as vociferous, just as vocal, seemed to be a pretty good balance between experienced organizers and young organizers. They were very inclusive, very queer friendly, very immigrant friendly. Just very human, you know? Very human, very loving, very endearing group of people. But also very close, in a sense. Close, in proximity. You felt the closeness that people had, I guess you could call it clique-ish, a little bit. But things worked well, you know, during the actions. Because people trust each other. So when you're doing direct actions and things like that, you have to have that level of trust in the members in your squad team. Or whatever your flying squad. But I really just listened a lot. I listened a lot, and processed things on my own, I spoke up every once in a while, but at the beginning I really just didn't have much to say. I never really had much to say. As opposed to just listening, most of the time, even if I did agree with something, I would try to

voice something. For the most part, I understood that this was going on, I could drop dead and it would continue, and my own personal thing was

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to try to aid the process, try to make it more immigrant friendly, more Spanish friendly. I really agree with everything that was being said. [00:35:00] I really agree with a lot of the views. It was very holistic, it wasn't just about students and tuition, or Hunter, or CUNY. It was pretty universal. Talking about the prison industrial complex, talking about colonialism, and globalization, and trying to stop Bush from even becoming president, because we knew about him being a governor in Texas. The way that people were linking up struggles from student government, Hunter College, to CUNY wide, to state wide. And how people did the math, money taken away from education was going to prisons, incarceration rates were going through the roof, and women of color are going through the roof in terms of prison, and dropping college attendance. It was very clear, people had done their homework. Since, what's his name, Andy, I forget his last name, he's in Minnesota now, he's a professor or something. He practically, people say, he practically wrote books during '96, '97, '98. He's one of the main researchers of stuff people would use on their flyers, speeches, whatever. They were pretty studious, pretty well rounded group of people who could

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facilitate a flying squad, or facilitate a meeting, or talk to the media, write a press release, or do research, come up with some really interesting, accessible articles, you know? People who organize, kept the meetings going, kept the agendas going, things like that. These people that can attract a crowd, just very different, very diverse people. Diverse group of folks. We did listen to some of the other folks, like Kae, and she had a bad experience with Chris, and some of the other guys were [being on her jet?], like Rochelle, and John. People who run in other groups, throughout the city, and in other states. It was a very, for me, it was a really good learning process. I felt like I was in school, as being a part of SLAM. To the point where I neglected my studies a lot. Not just I couldn't pay, this and that, I had to work all the time, blah blah blah. I found a place in which I thought I was using my time wisely. In retrospect, maybe, if I was in the same situation, I would have advised myself to try to finish school, one way or another. It gets harder, when you get older, you have more responsibilities, to be in school, and to work. I was young.

Amaka: You're not the only one. Almost everyone I

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talked to said a similar thing (laughs). Like, "I was there for a long time."

Mariano: The structure, the structure was very horizontal, but I mean, you could feel that there were some people who were listened to a little more than others. It was transparent within the meetings, minutes were taken, decisions were followed, decisions that were agreed upon were followed. So, being new and being an outsider, say after a year of being there, I felt a little bit as if there were the weekly meetings and there were five meetings in between them. There weren't really official. Groups of three, groups of four.

Amaka: And they were still over student government at the time, right?

Mariano: Yeah, yeah.

Amaka: So it was also that.

Mariano: There were students that took the government in '98, something like that, and lost it in 2001 and something, 2002, maybe? I forget. I did feel like there were the general meetings, people discussed, but there were smaller meetings, pre-meetings, in which the ideas and the actions to take were developed even farther. So you kind

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of had the sense that when you came back to the general meetings, people had already processed some things, they were presenting clear pathways to do this and that. After a year I started wondering about those meetings in between, which I was part of sometimes. For the most part. I became the secretary in 2000, 2001, I forget. We were applying for some grants at the North Star, so we had to be a little more structured in our organization. [00:40:00] So we did some voting, we chose a

treasurer, we chose a steering committee, that's what they called it. Ended up being the secretary for the steering committee, going to the fundraisers, asking for money, this and that. That was when it became a bit more structured. But that was also when SLAM was really on the decline, that's one of the ways to fight that, to get structure. Foreseeing that we were going to get voted out of student government, which is pretty much an endless resource, endless money resource, not that we misspent the money. Whenever elections came around, there were always a couple of groups that seemed like they could take on the SLAM slate. It was agreed that it could happen. That's why we started applying to other funders outside of school. So we made that steering

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committee, which is made of some of the older heads, some of the younger heads. So I was one of the younger heads, one of the newer people.

Amaka: And we'll go back, because I feel like you've already started to talk about this, but what do you think were the factors at play in the decline of SLAM, and when it ended? I guess you left before it ended officially, but can you speak to that?

Mariano: Yeah, I think, like most things, it's hard to pinpoint one thing.

Amaka: It's multiple things. (laughs)

Mariano: It's multiple things. Some people graduated, some people graduated and moved on to different things. Times were changing, times were changing. I think we had to deal with being Giuliani rule for so many years. The fight, even at a national level. I think maybe we started focusing, or branching out, on things like the prison industrial complex, and trying to shut down the Republican Convention of 2000 in Philadelphia. We were able to bring several hundred students from New York down there. It's hard to tell. Some people moved on, some people graduated, some people burned out. It may have had to do with the

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demographics of the school itself changing under our noses. Semester in, semester out. Pricing people out. We did start to feel and see the heavy influx of Eastern European students, coming from places like Serbia, some of the places of Eastern Europe. Not that they weren't political, they were just a different type of students. Maybe having lived through all of these experiences, it just makes you apolitical. You don't want to have to deal with anything to do with any politics. Maybe when you come from those backgrounds. What else? We spent a lot of effort and energy on the Convention, trying to affect the Convention. Then the towers fell in 2001, that had a lot to do with it as well. I think personally, I was this close to going back to Peru. I really didn't see a viable future here, being undocumented in such a hostile environment for immigrants, things like that. You know, we were treading lightly during those days, like what kind of actions we were going to do, things like that. I don't know, there could have been some interpersonal disputes, you know, between couples, this and the other. There was some of that, there was some of that. I don't know to what degree it affected the group. I was never involved with anybody

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in the group in that sense.

Amaka: I talked to Jeremiah the other day, I interviewed him, which was really the first time I heard anything about, kind of, couples, or... I think that happened after, but we talked about his [00:45:00] dramatic relationship, or something, and relationship, in some ways, to SLAM. So it's interesting that you say that.

Mariano: There were some couples that were formed during that time, and there were some breakups as well. Those are always hard, for both people, for the group, you know? It could be nasty. You have to take sides, this and the other. We tried, we had a retreat, I remember, I think after Philly, maybe. I think after Philly. They went to [Ladina's?] house to have some kind of weekend retreat, different things. It was hard, lots of tears.

Amaka: What was difficult about that retreat in particular?

Mariano: Well, it was supposed to be a space to reflect on the work, but it was also supposed to be a space from the communist background of criticism and self criticism, you get criticized, but you also do it yourself. The group also focuses on one person, on the good and bad. So the

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first day, you did the good. You sit in the middle, everyone says something nice about you. The next day, we were supposed to do the opposite. You sit in the middle, and the whole group says something you should improve. We never got to the second day. I don't know why, but it wasn't a bad experience, but we didn't flush things out. Maybe because there were tears during the nice part. We had another retreat, actually at Jeremiah's house. This is before Ladina's house, I don't know how long before, but we had another retreat there. And there were also some other things come up, some things that shouldn't have come up just during retreats, things that should have been addressed as they happened.

Amaka: So they don't build up.

Mariano: There were some strong personalities in the group that people thought couldn't be challenged.

Amaka: Is this [Jed?], perhaps?

Mariano: He was one of them. He was one of them. So was Kae, I think. I think [Sandra Bavos?] had, not a problem with Kae, but felt that Kae was just too perfect, being who she is, and having the history that she has, she was just infallible. You couldn't tell her she didn't anything

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wrong. Not that she thought that she did anything wrong. But then, she didn't know how to deal with that. Jed and Cynthia had a problem as well, I forget exactly. I was very aware of these things, that's why I really kept away from any of that.

Amaka: You mean just personal stuff?

Mariano: Yeah, I remember, years later talking amongst friends, I would hear stories about what they thought about me when I first came in. They thought I was gay, they thought I was not gay, they thought I didn't like them, something like. Not just the girls, everybody. Because we just wouldn't hang out, afterwards. The meeting was done, I would stay for a little longer, I would go home. The process was done, I would go home. Sometimes I'm a hard one to jump to belong to somewhere, with any group that I'm around. It takes me a while to belong to the group, I don't know why. Maybe because my family had eight, nine people growing up. We never really needed anybody. We were family with other people, and this and the other, but friends would come over, would have five siblings. Maybe had something to do, maybe because my parents, when the right wing coup happened, they had to draw back, they kind

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of cut ties with some of their lefty friends. There was some persecution going around, this and the other. I remember my older brothers would tell me that we would, during those days, I was a baby, my parents would get invitations for different things, parties, weddings, this and the other. They never responded to any of that, half of that because they were trying to raise six kids, it was very hard on them, didn't have money to go do anything. And the other part was because we were a little bit far from the rest of the city, this and that. Raising six kids is a full time job for both parents. Maybe that's something to do with it. Me personally, I never, especially in this country I guess, but even as a child, just my personality [00:50:00] I think... I'll belong to a team, I'm very team oriented, in terms of soccer, martial arts, I'm all about it. But I also have my own clan. And I have my own clan, the closest people to me are not that group. Not to say I don't respect that group, but at the beginning, I would just come in, pick up flyers, come back three days later, and then come in, I would skip the meetings, and this and that. And I wouldn't go to the parties, I wouldn't go to the after part, for many, many months. Only when I started getting

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close to one or two of the members there, then we would start to hang out, in couples, or in trios. Then, you know, slowly but surely, we all became friends. It took a while, it took a while. To the point where I didn't know about some of the drama that was going on. I kind of figured it out, these two are not holding hands anymore, or, he hasn't been around after that. But I wasn't very close to them, I wouldn't really ask, I would kind of assume, just be on the side of the majority I guess. Whatever the majority is doing.

Amaka: Who were you closest to in the group?

Mariano: Jeremiah I was close to later on, not so much at the beginning. [Saou?] and Liam, I was probably the closest, we were the youngest, the same class. Liam is very sports oriented as well, so we had that in common. Saou, close in age, Ecuadorian and Peruvian, so we had that in common. Those two. But also John, John Kim. John was very good at welcoming new members, going the extra mile to show you things, and this and the other. I just learned a lot from older folks, like John. In terms of theory, in terms of New York lefty history, you know what I'm saying? Or U.S. lefty history in the past 30 years, the John

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Commons League, R.C.P., the Revolutionary Communist Party, and this and that. Not that I belonged to any of those, or that I wanted to, but a lot of the stories around those subjects came from John, came from Jed, Kae would also tell stories a lot. I learned a lot from her, also. During Philly, those couple weeks in Philadelphia, during the convention, we were all together. I learned a lot from her. It was kind of hard, my brother would get back, he was inside for like seven days, it was kind of rough, and she was really good support during those times. Chris Day as well, or Chris Anderson, I learned a lot from him. Anybody really, anybody who had something to say. I remember coming home and telling stories about these people that I'm meeting, and how they're all fascinating in their own way, how they all specialize in different things, but how politically, everyone's on point.

Amaka: Can you speak to any significant events, actions, or just activities that you were involved in? You mentioned briefly the actions around the Republican National Convention. Any significant events, activities?

Mariano: Yeah. Let's see, let's do it chronologically. First it was the protest against the Board of Trustees,

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against DEO, there was a few of those that I worked on. Next semester, we were gearing up for Philly, gearing up for the summer of 2000. Having different teachings, different things to raise awareness for what was about to happen nationally. Then Philadelphia came, street fairs were happening, you know, events like that. Different CUNY wide forums on open admissions and the fight against the Board of Trustees. I became student senator during that time as well. So we would have to deal with budget, and we were trying to influence the deans about the budget, this and that and the other. [00:55:00] At that time, Hunter was chosen as the flagship for CUNY, so we were trying to organize against that, I remember, through the student senate. The elections came and went. Police brutality, Diallo happened during that time, Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima sometime before Diallo. Pretty much whenever something happened, you know, we would support the actions there, try and get students together to try and come support actions. Then Philly. Then in the fall of 2000, that's probably when I took off from school, started working a lot. The next year, yeah. Whenever the Board of Trustees met, we would have an action. I'm probably

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forgetting all kinds of shit.

Amaka: Would you say that most, because most of what you've mentioned sounds to me like rallies or protests. Were SLAM's, I guess, tactics mostly direct action? Protests, rallies, those kinds of things?

Mariano: Yeah, I mean we had a whole PE section, you know, political education structure, I remember working on that with John as well a little bit. Taking classes as well, meeting people from the West Coast, folks from Storm, Harmony, Cindy. It was ongoing, we put on workshops on how to subvert the message. Ladina had already graduated from communications, I think she was beginning her MFA, her master's in fine arts and journalism, so she was running some workshops about media stuff, this and the other. It was kind of like learning by doing. How to put events together, how to send press releases, things like that. Also, whenever something came up, like police brutality, tragedy, we would jump to that, to support different things that were happening on different campuses. At that point, we were trying to revive the CUNY wide

movement, which didn't really pop off. Then called it CAN, I think CUNY Action Network, for some time, we would go to different

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campuses throughout the city, try to plug in with those students. I think the most significant, of course, to me, is the Republican National Convention, for sure.

Amaka: And why was that the most significant?

Mariano: It was traumatic, in a sense. I wish it was a happy story. It's happy in the sense that I learned a lot. A lot of good lessons were learned, but we got our asses kicked, pretty much. Short story, we got our asses kicked?

Amaka: What were some of those good lessons learned from RNC?

Mariano: That the system really gets ready, and there is no precedence. We were coming in after Seattle, the WTO, '99. And how they took over the city, they shut the motherfucker down, success. They arrested 400, kept them for a day, everybody was released, nobody got charged, even some of the people who had records, they were able to sneak by. It was successful. So that was more or less the thinking that we had, coming into Philadelphia. And it wasn't the case at all. They were ready, they were ready and they weren't going to budge, and they didn't budge. So they arrested everybody.

Amaka: Did you get arrested?

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Mariano: No, I didn't get arrested. I wasn't planning on getting arrested, even though I did some things that I'm not going to mention on tape, you're young and you're crazy. I wasn't planning on getting arrested, I didn't sign up for a flying squad that was risking arrest. My game during those days was to dress up like a reporter and just be support. To be able to step in and out of the fire in a sense, you know? But then again, when your friends are getting beat up, you jump in, what are you going to do? You're not gonna be like, "People get hurt." It was pretty risky. Had I gotten caught it would have been bad. Not for me, for me, too, but I always think about my mother. All the things your family has to go through. [01:00:00] Even though I was over 18, I knew it was going to affect them, tremendously, if I ended up getting deported or something like that. I was willing to deal with it, of course, I didn't get arrested, my brother got arrested, the musician. He didn't really listen. Everybody was advised to stay within a group, stay with your group, and he's very independent, very artistic, very passionate, and very athletic, so he thought he could do his Superman thing, and he just got bagged. And it was really hard on us. It was

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like a family crisis.

Amaka: So he got arrested, did he get deported?

Mariano: No, they never knew.

Amaka: Okay, good.

Mariano: He just stayed inside for like seven days. The whole thing about the strategy was that we were going to do what the people in Seattle did. Direct action, some black people are going to break some shit up, I guess, just try and stay away from it, we were supporting the blockades, you know? I don't know how much I can say. You're going to take care of the confidentiality right?

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mariano: In terms of, people broke the law during those days. Just be careful of that. How to mention names. I don't think anything will happen, but whatever. Our flying squad was going to be a decoy, so then the real blockade was happening. So the heat was on us, people's phones were tapped, it was very easy. Whenever you mentioned a number or an address, the machine just clicked on. We knew we were getting tapped, the phones were tapped. We knew that they were onto us. So knowing that we were the decoy blockade, we put all the heat towards us, and the real

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blockades happened. And they were successful. The real blockades were successful. And they held the blockades down, they shut the city down for sure. But then, people started getting bagged, left to right, and they weren't getting anybody out. Not to my knowledge, not anybody. Not the minors,

not the white kids, no one. It was pretty traumatic. (Shani?] got picked up, during the first day. And that was hard because he was just there as a tourist, he wasn't really involved in SLAM, he knew some SLAM people, some people that had come to see him, you know. His politics were just as radical as mine. If anything, my family expected me to get arrested, if anything. They would have been more okay with that, in their process. He gets bagged, and at that time, the agreement, which wasn't really decided amongst everybody, was that we were going to do jail solidarity, no one give up their names, that way to protect people who have records, people who are undocumented, whatever. That was the idea coming in, when the jails started to fill up, 100, 200, 300. People started breaking the jail solidarity, because it was hard. They were beating people up inside, they were twisting people's hands, they twisted somebody's penis. They were

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hanging people from... It was horrific, it was like torture, you know? People were being mistreated, a lot. It's Philly, it's not Seattle. It's, fucking, you know, it's different people. I forget the mayor's name, Dale, I think it was? Notorious, you know? Notorious for their brutality. They knew they were there for Bush, but they also knew we were there for Mumia, and you know how they like Mumia in Philly. How they don't like him, I guess. They saw the connections, you know? So people started breaking jail solidarity quick enough, numbers started to dwindle, there wasn't an organized jail solidarity situation, so, it was pretty precarious. We were just bugging, man. We didn't have any contact with my brother, I didn't really know where he was. I was the one who had legal support. Like everybody else, my main motivation was the overall humanist movement, then the States, then New York, then SLAM, then my flying squad, then my brother. You know? So it was very personal, the political was very personal. It was scary, we couldn't get in touch with him, we didn't know what the fuck was going on, this and that and the other. He finally called one night. I would stay up the whole night organizing the legal office, because

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during the day it was really, really busy. All kinds of reports were coming in from jail, from the streets, from legal services, this and that. [01:05:00] Some people were calling from jail, blah blah blah, this guy needs medicine, this guy needs this, blah, blah, blah. It was really chaotic during the day, but at night only like two people, somebody answering the phone. So there was time for me to organize all the information, organize so the lawyers will come back the next day and they will have the recent in patterns, and it will be easier to work. In the back of my head I just wanted to be in that office as much as I could, so maybe, Shani would call. Maybe if he would call, I would talk to him. So then, the time he called, Kae picked up, and she was like, I spoke to your brother. He needs to do jail solidarity. Nobody really knew in SLAM either, some people knew, but not really. I guess I came from not really saying anything from my high school days, I didn't say anything. Some people kind of assumed, not really. Some of the people who had more experience with immigrants, when they would ask me some questions, and I would be like, "No, I can't come back yet." Things like that. Kae knew at that moment. So he had to stay in for seven days, he

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was one of the last ten people to be out, out of the 400. Chris Anderson was still in. Chris Anderson was one of the ones who stayed inside, he was actually transferred to the jail, to the big house. He spent a night or two there, and my brother was let out, we had to go there and pay the fine. We went there and paid the fine, he had to come back first court date.

Amaka: Do you think --

Mariano: The blockades work, we really just ruined their day. We didn't stop the convention. The convention happened. It was, the blockades happened and that was part of the mission. That was positive, in that sense. There were more negative aspects than positive.

Amaka: Less positive, negative, what you learned? The true power of the extent of the police and state repression that you experienced.

Mariano: For sure. It was brutal, man. It was just brutal. It was brutal. They were out to swing. This was before people had cameras on all the time.

Amaka: With the phones and stuff.

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Mariano: So they were just beating people up in the street. It was empowering, it was empowering also, seeing

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a whole squadron of horses coming at you. People giving the call, dumpsters coming, laid out on the street, horses couldn't even go by, you move on to the other street. That's empowering. You're stopping the machine. Some of the lessons learned, we should have had stronger connections with people in Philly, especially northern Philly, we should have had more connections with the community there, via community based organizations, non-profits, schools, universities, door-to-door, whatever it was. We didn't have that connection, so the day of, people were hating on us, regular folk, just trying to make it to work, picking up their kids from school. Just panicking, because it was mayhem. It was mayhem. You couldn't go anywhere downtown. I remember people screaming at us, "What the fuck are you doing? My child's in school!" It was real, man. You're protesting and doing your thing, but you're really fucking somebody's day up. And some of these folks, you lose your job, you're unemployed, you live check to check. It can be life changing, you know what I'm saying. That's one of the things we could have done better, people understood that right away. That we were going to fuck up people's week, and maybe we should have

had a more publicized way of doing it. Which is hard, like how are you going to publicize that you're going to shut down the police and everything. That work could have been done a little better, some more ground work, some more connections with people that were going to be affected, so at least people knew. People understand that you can get involved, for whatever reason, good or bad, but at least they know, "Oh shit, I gotta change my route," I gotta do this, I gotta take care of this, that. People know, they can adjust to whatever. That wasn't really the case.

Amaka: Do you think --

Mariano: And also, a lot of us weren't from Philly, so there was the outsider, outside agitator. Half of the people there were from Philly, but the other half weren't, so people also knew that, because people know who lives in their city. [01:10:00] So, knowing that, also, for us to do more groundwork before the days of action should have been key.

Amaka: Do you, I mean, I guess I have a question regarding what the debrief process was after the RNC and, I mean, I'm wondering now, hearing about just the experience of, you know, the extreme police repression, I don't know

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what you guys felt like, if you felt like it was successful, if you felt the defeat, or whatever the case may be, if in some ways that experience may have contributed to a decline?

Mariano: Yeah, yeah. I think that's a reasonable assumption. It took us a while for us to admit in public, or in the group, that we had gotten our asses kicked. It took us a while. Because we weren't even done with the court cases. Some people had open court cases, because they were dealing with serious shit. Some of these debriefs wasn't really like a pleasant, safe, debrief, it was like we have to get shit done, there's still a lot going on. People were facing ten years in jail, 20 years in jail, 100,000 dollar bail. It was real, this takes weeks and months, there may not have been a space that was safe, once it was over with you can sit back and reflect and get the subject out there. It was happening still, you know? That may have something to do with how the debriefs didn't really work, or they didn't really happen, or they really didn't help, or people weren't in a space to reflect yet or be honest about what happened. That also affects the work that you're doing, or that you're trying to do.

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Personally, I have to step back to raise money for the fines, this that and the other. Yeah, so I mean, yeah. Before, there's many different things that affect the outcome of things. In this case, I think it was the fact that people had open cases. Still, the debriefs that I went to were mostly legal sessions, how to counteract, how to keep the information enclosed. There were open cases, you have to watch what you said. I remember trying to have a debrief in Hunter, in the lounge that was part of the student government rooms, and there was one young kid there, I mean, not young, my age at

the time, he felt empowered, he was like “Yeah, man, it was awesome. We were there and we were blocking the street, and we held it down.” And we were like, “Wait.” Let’s try and speak in general terms, don’t say I, because you don’t know who’s here. Because it was real, they were still picking people out here and there. If you were self-incriminating yourself saying you blocked the highway, you know what I’m saying? Some of the debriefs had that sense of paranoia, still, you know what I’m saying? And that affects the way the discussion ensues.

Amaka: Okay, so, I’ll try and keep this short,

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because I know you only have, what, 15 more minutes?

Mariano: We can go until 8:00, 8:05, we have another 35 minutes.

Amaka: What was your, I mean, in terms of your perception of SLAM chapters on other campuses. The City College chapter still in existence when you were in Hunter, and Brooklyn College?

Mariano: Yes.

Amaka: What was your perception of, I guess, their, yeah.

Mariano: My perception was that City was pretty active, City was pretty active, to me the most active aside from Hunter. But then CSI was pretty active, too. CSI had their stuff going on there. And then people in the city. I think that Hunter SLAM and City SLAM didn’t really vibe too much sometimes.

Amaka: Why do you think so?

Mariano: I don’t know, that’s what I felt at the beginning. I always get along with people, personally, but there was something like that. I think at that time, [01:15:00] it was kind of like, they started calling themselves City SLAM, or Harmlem SLAM, rather, Harlem SLAM,

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I think it was. And then people felt like they weren’t really repping Harlem correctly, you know? They weren’t even from New York, so then we started calling ourselves Hunter SLAM. But then CSI was pretty close to Hunter, we had actions, people would show solidarity back and forth. Those three were the ones to my knowledge. Hunter, City, or Harlem SLAM, and CSI. And we knew about Brooklyn, but it wasn’t popping by the time I was there anymore.

Amaka: What was, I mean, SLAM in some ways was unique, I guess in some ways as a student organization, in that it seemed pretty integrated with organizations off of campus. Can you speak to that? Just the relationships that SLAM had with non-student organizations off of campus?

Mariano: Yeah. It seemed to be, everybody seemed to bring something to the table, you know? You had people who were working with high schools, HSOP, High School Organizing Project, and they worked with different high schools, and they tried to work with different high school students and their political process. There were different connections that we had with some of the more known non-profits, like Make the Road, El Puente. In Bushwick, I remember going to meetings in different places, different community places,

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you know? Going to Harlem, hanging out with zappatistas, I don’t know where the connections came from, certainly not mine. I mean I had a couple from like, my connections were from the Spanish, Latino, politically lefty music scene, underground scene. Rock and Spanish, lefty scene, type of stuff. Which I had some connections with, because of my brother, who had a band and all that. I was helping him with that and trying to manage that, and trying to radicalize the band, trying to radicalize the audience, you know? There was some of that. Yeah, but everyone just seemed to have some sort of connection that they’ve made with non-profits within their neighborhood, or within their identity, that they had with people from FIERCE, the queer group, they were pretty active. They’re still active. But they were stronger. What does FIERCE stand for? I forget, stood for something, FIERCE. Really radical group.

Amaka: I know FIERCE.

Mariano: Jesse Ehrensaft[-Hawley]. I remember him being a SLAM fam, we called them. There were always people that went to meetings from different groups, trying to connect with whatever SLAM was doing, because we did leave the campus all the time, and we did support many different

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struggles in the city, from like queer struggles, to political prisoners, to international struggles, people went out to Chiapas a couple times, [Sassa, Anna, Puertego?], went to Chiapas for a season. Because people had connections with Chiapas, I think it was Chris Anderson, writing a book about it, I haven't read that one yet. [Ese Son Libre?], was another group, it was based in Chiapas but it was also based in New York, trying to make connections between New Yorkers and the zapatistas. So, there was that, and we also make connections with the people in Harlem. It seemed like some Puerto Rican members had some connections with people in Puerto Rico, and friends who are there, and Puerto Rican political prisoners from way back. And we had some connections with Cubans, and the Cuban fights, people from Florida as well. Just different things. [01:20:00] Seemed like we were pretty political all around. The Palestinian club, they were pretty radical as well. They had [Hamas sisters, Suhai, Suzanne, Sabrine?], huge SLAM people, you know? There was the Palestinian influence, the Palestinian liberation influences there. Some of the east Asian members, or south Asian members. We had, not really connections, but likings, political likings with people

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from Vietnam, things like that. It was pretty universal, in that sense. When the students strike in UNAM, in the Mexican university happened, they took over for like seven months. Cynthia, [Cathion?], and Liam went, they stayed two weeks during the strike, Saou went as well, I'm not sure. Two or three people went from SLAM. And they were part of the strikes for like two weeks. They came back with all kinds of crazy reports, at the end of that. I don't know who had that connection, somebody, I don't know who. But yeah, there's always been... And then connections with the West Coast, as well, people in [storn?]. What was the other group from the West Coast? I forget. I forget. They would link us up with really good political theory, but for students. They would come by from the West Coast and have exchanges, and people would come from here to there. I remember helping to organize a conference in the South I think, and we'd pull people from different states, student organizers from different states. People from SLAM went, I could never go because I couldn't travel. I would just help to organize. But yeah, it seemed like there was always pretty strong connections to different nonprofits. And different groups in the city,

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all radical. If not radical in their mission, people who worked there thought like us, you know what I'm saying? Even if the organization's mission, because of whatever funding they get, be it state, federal, private, they have to follow some sort of line, the people who worked there were pretty radical. And we shared the same political beliefs, so. And the people who were doing police watch work throughout the city, meeting up with them. It was pretty much a lot the same members of SLAM doing something else, apart from being students, and people that graduated who kept those links alive.

Amaka: For a student organization, SLAM had a long lifespan, why do you think that that's the case?

Mariano: I think that being reelected to student government helped a lot. I think some of the core members stayed there for a pretty long time, five, six years, I think. Taking classes, on and off. People were involved in the newspaper, people were involved in the student government, we had people in the student senate, we had people in the dorms. We were pretty good at branching out and occupying different spheres within the campus, within the university at large. So that probably has something to

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do with it. For example, John Kim, he graduated from SVU with an Arts degree, and then he came to Hunter. So, he would just take a couple classes a semester, one or two, just to be a student. He was just an organizer. People have different feelings about that, but it worked. It worked. Some of the people like Rochelle, were full time students, Sandra, for example, students, graduated, this and that. Some people were hired, like Kae, for instance, she wasn't a student. She was probably late thirties, early forties, when she was with us. But her commitment was pretty clear, to develop the youth, develop politically radical youth, and she did it well for the two years she was there,

two, three years maybe. But then she was done. She was like, "I think I'm coming full circle." [01:25:00] She went back south. To my knowledge she's probably the only one, only paid organizer that we had that was never a student, you know? Or wanted to be a student or anything like that. I'm probably wrong, but to my knowledge I think that's the only one. Chris was older, but he was getting his degree.

Amaka: She was what? She ran the resource center, or?

Mariano: No, she worked in the student government office,

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she had some post, some nominal post. Like whatever, I don't know. Some post, office, manager, whatever you call it. Yeah, but she wasn't a student, I think she was the only one.

Amaka: I guess, answer this whichever way, in terms of, you know, when you left Hunter, when you left SLAM, do you think your participation in SLAM may have, you know, shaped you in any way or influenced you in any way?

Mariano: Oh yeah, I wouldn't be the same person I am today if it wasn't for SLAM, for sure. I mean, I would still be me, but... I mean, who's to know, you can't really remove one part of your life and figure out what would have happened. But yeah, I think the political connections that I made during SLAM, all the people that I met, some of them have become lifelong friends, not all of them, for sure. But then, you know, to me, for me, that was my way into the movement. However you want to call it, whatever's happening these days, in New York, the States, the world, really. As an adult, I've made some other connections, gone back to Lima, and they have nothing to do with SLAM. But I think primarily, yeah, the people that I met there, the connections that I made there, the organizations that I

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met through there, through that work, yeah. I've taken them with me off campus. I use them all the time. I guess use sounds bad.

Amaka: I know what you mean.

Mariano: But you know what I mean. For sure, for sure. Maybe if I moved to another city it would have been different, but I moved here, I stayed here. Like I said, I've been to five different CUNY schools, this and that, so for sure, it's very, I trace back a lot of my connections to SLAM folk. For example, the job that I have now. I was recommended by the wife of one of the SLAM members. So for sure, yeah. I think.

Amaka: So I guess, perfect segue, after SLAM, up to even now, what type of work have you been involved in?

Mariano: So, during SLAM I started working for the paper, for the school paper, but I could never get paid because I didn't have a social security, so I just did free work for a long time. I didn't really tell them, they tried to pay me, and I couldn't get paid. Then, because of a SLAM recommendation actually, I organized tenants for about two years in the city. I worked in the house (inaudible), organizing rent stabilization tenants for the Met Council

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on Housing for a couple of years. Then for about half a year or a little bit more in the Bronx, with New Settlement apartments. And then, from that time, I guess it must have been 2004, from that time, I started focusing my activist work, paid and unpaid, from an immigrant perspective. Immigrant, Latino perspective, I guess. Or Latin American perspective. Ever since, that's been more or less my focus, whenever I get involved in something, I try to have that perspective. When I was organizing tenants, they hired me to revamp the Latino membership, which was pretty nonexistent in the group. [01:30:00] And a lot of Latino immigrant families live in these rent stabilized apartments and they don't even know, so that was part of my mission within that job. Then, that was a paid organizing job, countless volunteer campaigns that I've been involved with. Some of the same issues, police brutality, solidarity work, international work, education as well. I started working in a school in South Bronx in 2006 or so. I was a mentor for a bunch of kids, got a mentor degree when I was going through hostos, and I started teaching math to kids over there in South Bronx. It wasn't super political, but as a mentor you can talk about whatever, you know? Then I

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worked at [Register Votives?] for a while, as well, it wasn't that political, but you know, trying to get Bush not reelected in '04. And then I didn't work for the Obama campaign or anything like that, but I did some of that previously. I also started translating a lot. When I gained mastery of the English language, which I still don't have, but when I became more fluent I started translating a lot, so through that I've visited dozens of nonprofits in the city, as a translator, as an interpreter. I have a pretty well rounded background in social justice, so it's a lot easier to translate, so I'll go to the Bronx, translate for the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, translate for social justice, many others, through their grapevines, happened to look for a translator, so I go. And then I become involved, depends what they're doing, I come and I go, try and develop some of their membership. And then most recently, within the ocupado movement, we created a Spanish assembly, immigrant assembly, came up with -- have you seen this little newspaper thingy? I translated the Occupied Wall Street Journal into Spanish, this is a Spanish...

Amaka: Oh I've seen those! I think I have that

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one, actually.

Mariano: I'm the editor, founder of this. Me and some other people. This is actually pretty good, because all these folks here, that's the one thing that SLAM didn't really have, radical Latino immigrants, politically radical Latino immigrants. They had Latinos, Sandra, Saou, but they were all born here, you know. It's not that we didn't have immigrants, I don't think, except for me, there were immigrants, they had just come very young. Like two or three. Most of the people in SLAM were born in the States. So I never really had the capacity to do something like this. Say with Jed, we've had this idea since forever, have a paper, or a pamphlet in Spanish, fully in Spanish, for a Spanish audience in the city. And then because of the ocupado movement, I found all these radical Latinos in the park. I never slept in the park, I take showers and shit. (laughter) You know? I'm going to bite my words, if anybody reads your dissertation.

Amaka: You know, that's not going to make it to the final project.

Mariano: I never slept there, but I was there pretty much every day, you know, on my way back from work. Because of

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the translation from the Occupied Wall Street Journal when we translated it into Spanish, I met all these Latinos that were helping with the translation, and were like, "Fuck this translation, like let's make our own shit." And that was actually the deal with the Occupied Wall Street Journal from the beginning, I'll help you translate the paper, but when we're ready to have a Spanish paper, you're going to help us out with the design, the computers, and all that, the printers and all that. So that was the deal. So then, because of the ocupado movement, I befriended all these Latinos that lived in the city, [01:35:00] and they're politically radical, the way they think. Most of them are Puerto Rican, which sucks, because they go back and forth, before you know it they're like, "Okay! I'm moving back." And I was like, "Oh, I thought you were a New Yorker." Not just Puerto Ricans, there were other ethnicities as well. So that's been pretty healthy in that sense. So now, we have another set of people, another network as well. But yeah, so that's pretty much what I've been doing politically ever since SLAM.

Amaka: It seems, you know, you know, some people go to college and become politically active and they do stuff,

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and then they graduate and they don't continue their political work. Why do you think so many SLAM people continued their political work after they graduated or left?

Mariano: Yeah, I think that was just the understanding from the beginning. To me, I think. That's what I felt, the people were there because they really cared. They didn't want to get the credit for community service, they didn't want to get the, not that it's bad if you do, it's fine, I mean it's better than doing something else with your free time. Yeah, but it was a shared consciousness that, you know, that things were fucked up, and they're going to be fucked up after we graduate, but we

need to change things. That pressing feeling that if you want to go to sleep at night then you have to put in your work during the day. And not just your work but your social justice work, and tie it into whatever you're doing, whatever your vocation is. I think from the beginning that was understood. I guess tacitly understood, but we had some pretty good role models. There were older folks in SLAM, and because of our links with other nonprofits, and other groups in the city, nationwide, we saw other people that had gone on. Kae had been a student organizer as

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well, she went to school with Spike Lee. She was telling us a story one time, before their graduation, Nancy Reagan was going to go and be the keynote or whatever, so they were all organizing against it, they were going to stand up and do some action. And Spike Lee was like, "No, my grandma's coming, dude, I can't." (laughter)

Amaka: That's not surprising.

Mariano: We had some good role models that had gone through that. Personally, I knew I was going to do this, I was going to be active in one way or another forever. And that's how I felt with everybody else. And I think for the most part people have. Whatever they're doing, people have kept that honesty to themselves, that commitment to themselves, that commitment to social justice. And you know, just living your life, and not just removing yourself and living in some mountain somewhere. Just keeping it real, in a progressive, radical, as much as you can. I work for the DOE now, I'm a (inaudible) associate. And I took that job because I met the principal, and she's really radical, too, but she's in the monster, she tells me stories about her family in the Dominican Republic, and they have assassins that ended up killing Trujillo, the

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dictator of the Dominican Republic way back in the '60s. The assassins that actually, he was almost assassinated several times during his regime. But at the very end, the people that actually got him, the guys slept in her home the night before. She wasn't even born yet, but in her mother's house. So that kind of radical, you know? And she shared that with me. I don't think she shares that with all the teachers, you know? But she knew, Jessica, who is Chris's wife, so she knows Jessica's politics, and she knows Jessica and I are friends. So obviously she's trying to surround herself with people who think like her. So, little by little, we can make some changes at this school. It's an international high school, so all the families that come in are all immigrants, very recent immigrants. The families have to be here for less than five years, and some of them came like literally last week. A lot of them refugees, a lot of them from places where there is war going on, a lot of Yemeni kids, a lot of Central American kids, [01:40:00] a lot of Eastern European kids, you know? Some of them are refugees, some of them are asylees, a lot of East Asian as well. From all over the city, really. And they come in, I'm like the first person they meet, kind

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of, because I'm the parent coordinator, you know? I'm the parent coordinator, community associate, so I'm the first person they meet, I can get along with Spanish, and some French, and some Portuguese, I use translators for some of the other languages that I don't speak. It's a pretty interesting job, I think, for myself. I'm using all of the connections that I've made throughout the years, in terms of social justice in the city, in terms of immigrant struggles, immigrant justice, immigrant rights movement in the city, all those connections that I've made I'm putting to good work with these families right away. And really the principal and I get along really well, and she's like, "Do whatever you got to do. Just run it by and make sure there are no legalities going around." Pretty much whatever service, whatever this, whatever that, you can do. So there is ways to work within the system and affect real change, and talk to people directly and work with them directly, and get your paycheck and put in your good tax money to good work. Good Brooklyn taxpayer money to good work, I think.

Amaka: And it's good because it seems as if you have experienced that firsthand, so you can relate to those

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parents and to those students.

Mariano: I know that within the SLAM spectrum there are people against that, maybe, you know, like how could you be working for the city, how could you be taking Bloomberg's money, this and that. Okay, that's their opinion. But I think for the most part, people are not going to ostracize me for that decision. I think for the most part people understand. Because my politics to me are straight, I'm pretty clear on what I believe and how far I'm going to go, you know, I don't lose my dignity or my humanity when I go into work. People know who I am, I'm not trying to politicize the children, I'm not trying to politicize the families, but I'll tell them about things that are going on, and we'll talk critically about immigration and immigration reform and all that. And it's five blocks away.

Amaka: Oh nice! That's convenient.

Mariano: Yes. Yes, it's a new job so I'm really throwing myself into it. It's a public high school, it's a New York city public high school. There's never a dull day in a public high school, you know? I work inside the guidance office. You went to high school somewhere in New York?

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Amaka: I'm not from New York, I'm from the West Coast.

Mariano: Maybe similar, guidance office is like an oasis for all the students. Any sort of problem. From serious problems to not so serious problems, it's like, whatever, to not wanting to be in class. It's rough sometimes, because I'm not the best. I'm not even qualified, I don't even have a bachelor's. Kids come in, suicidal, and I'm like, I got to tread lightly, you know what I'm saying? Serious. And I get that kind of work because I'm in the office, I'm in the guidance office. So like if there's a fight going on, so the dean goes to take care of the fight, there's some other girl taking her pregnancy test with the social worker, and then there's two kids who come in crying because whatever. I got to take care of it. I should be doing more parent oriented stuff, trying to get the parent community more involved, trying to make them more active within the school, because that's supposed to be my number one mission, to have a strong parent community, you know? And it's hard because they live very far away, they speak all kinds of languages, very diverse cultures, you know? It's not like a neighborhood school, you know? So it's

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hard. And on top of that, my day is broken up into any sort of little, little and big student crisis that happens. It's good. I mean, I had a different expectation of it in the beginning, but now I'm almost done processing what the job really is.

Amaka: Do you have anything else that you didn't speak to or you want to reemphasize? Anything about SLAM or anything that we've discussed or maybe haven't got to?

Mariano: I think, I don't know, I think I said it all. Yeah I mean, I think SLAM, just to recap, SLAM had a very profound impact on my political development. [01:45:00] Not so much my political, maybe my queer political theory, yes. I was always very gay friendly, but I didn't really have the theory behind it, you know? So that was good. The challenges, you know? The constant challenges, all the time. That was good. I think that was... Communist theory, not really, anarchist theory, whatever, horizontalism. But yeah, SLAM has a very special place within my development, within my heart, I guess, you know. Some of my closest friends are from SLAM, so yeah. For sure, for sure. I think, you know, yeah, it's something I'll be telling my grandchildren about, if I ever have

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some.

Amaka: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

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