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**Interview with Lenina Nadal**  
**Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu**

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: So, can you -- this is just basic demographic information -- can you state your name? It'll pick it up.

Lenina Nadal: Lenina Nadal.

Amaka: And can you state your age?

Lenina: 37. (laughter)

Amaka: And how do you racially identify?

Lenina: I'm Puerto Rican.

Amaka: And how do you identify your gender?

Lenina: Female.

Amaka: And how do you identify your sexual orientation?

Lenina: (laughs) Straight with bi tendencies? I don't know... (laughter)

Amaka: And marital status and children?

Lenina: I am a single mom, so I have a daughter who is two years old, and I'm separated from the father.

Amaka: So where were you born and raised?

Lenina: I was born in Brooklyn, raised partially there, but then we moved to Long Island -- to Long Beach, Long Island -- when I was seven or eight years old, and I stayed there through high school. And then I went to school at Hunter, and that's where I met everybody.

Amaka: Okay. How would you describe the neighborhood and the community that you grew up in?

Lenina: Well, the -- the Brooklyn community that I grew up in was in Flatbush, mostly black Caribbean folks there. I had a lot of my family too, like in Sunset Park and the neighboring areas, and so... I mean it was the '70s and '80s at that time, and it was a lot of fun. It was awesome. We were -- my parents were very engaged in political activism. We did a lot of cultural events and work. We were with our family a lot. We sort of, like, very, kind of, like, always hanging out with people in the neighborhood. It was, it was definitely a much stronger feeling of that, you know? I think that when I was older we moved into the suburbs, it was definitely like very hard for me, and cold. Because there I was sort of then all of a sudden in the minority, and then it became kind of like, you know, like I couldn't really find my community. I mean, there was a Latino community, there wasn't a Puerto Rican community, so -- so that was cool. And I think that, you know, we made a space there, but it was definitely very different and isolating than Brooklyn was. So, yeah.

Amaka: Okay. Are your parents from the US?

Lenina: My parents are from PR but they moved to the US when they were young people, when they were kids.

Amaka: Okay. And how would you describe your parents politically growing up?

Lenina: Both of my parents were activists. My mother got involved in the movement because my two uncles went to Vietnam and so, she, you know, they were drafted into Vietnam. And so she felt concerned about their welfare and she would get letters from them, and when she saw the movement against the war in Vietnam she started getting curious, and she started finding out stuff and so she got involved in that, and my father kind of was interested in her, so -- (laughter) -- he got involved, and then he started reading a lot about Marxism and socialism and then they both integrated that, kind of, into their politics as well, but I think that for most they were for, like, Puerto Rican independence, and then I would say socialism as like a second rung of that. (laughs)

Amaka: So then you would say that you grew up in, like, a political household?

Lenina: Yeah, yeah. I think I have generally a pretty political family.

Amaka: Okay. And then how do you think that that, or I guess you can say if it did, but how do you think that it shaped you politically, just growing up in a place that was, or like, a household that was political? Or did it? (laughs)

Lenina: You know it's interesting because I think that when you -- because your family has been through everything, a political movement and struggle -- they don't necessarily want you to go through it too, you know? Because they kind of feel like, "where is this going?" and like, "things have changed in the society, and [00:05:00] you're not gonna benefit from being an activist or involved." So I think there was always a mixed message from me with that, you know, like, on the one hand, you know, I think my parents always made me question anything I was told by my teachers, especially when I was in Long Island, because there was a lot more like, overt racism, like, the tracking system was like, very like, white kids on the top, you know, black kids at the bottom, and Latino kids even below that because of second language issues. So it was very stratified, and so my parents were very keen to that and would talk to me about that and explain to me what was really going on and what that meant systematically, which empowered me and made me want to fight, you know? Because here I was experiencing the reality of that and knowing that I could do something, but I don't know if I, you know, I feel like their support -- I think overall they've been very supportive -- but like, it hasn't always been consistent. Yeah, so...

Amaka: What was your parents' education level, I guess growing up?

Lenina: Both of them graduated from Brooklyn College, and my father, he became a professor, he became a professor in Puerto Rican and Latino studies --

Amaka: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Lenina: -- in Brooklyn College. And my mother started working there as a counselor and eventually when I was like nine or ten she got her PhD, and then she was, she was a professor and now she's, like, in student affairs and like that.

Amaka: Were your parents at Brooklyn College during open admission, like, at the beginning, or during the strike, or like, what, do you know what time that they were there?

Lenina: They came in... wait, open admissions was in the '70s, right?

Amaka: Mm-hmm.

Lenina: Oh, they must have...

Amaka: The strike was in '69. And then tuition was instituted in '76.

Lenina: Mm-hmm. They were definitely there I think, like, in '68, around that time. Yeah, '68, '69.

Amaka: Did they say anything about that time being at Brooklyn College, or like, I guess anything in, yeah...

Lenina: Yeah, yeah. They were both really involved, which is kind of funny that I ended up really involved in that same movement, years later. (laughs) But they were both really involved in the struggle for, both I think open admissions but also for the Puerto Rican studies department. They kind of, like, really helped to head up that struggle. And also they implemented programs that came out of that department, like childcare programs that were really radical in terms of, like, the pedagogy and the education and all that. So yeah, so they were really involved in that time.

Amaka: Okay. So you went to Hunter. What years were you at Hunter?

Lenina: '93 to -- wait -- '93, '94, '95, '96. (laughs) '97, I think it was?

Amaka: Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. And you were, like, a full-time student when you were there?

Lenina: Yeah.

Amaka: And did you -- did you go to Hunter directly after high school?

Lenina: Yeah.

Amaka: When did -- so why did you choose Hunter? Like why Hunter for college? Or do you remember why you chose Hunter? (laughs)

Lenina: I chose Hunter -- I mean, I didn't really choose Hunter, it was more like my parents chose Hunter. But I chose Hunter because the Ivy League schools were really expensive and, you know, my father was like, "look, you can get a great education in this school, and you're not going to be paying loans for the rest of your life." And then, I didn't want to go to Brooklyn, because I was like, "I'm not going to go to the same college my parents were at -- like, worked at their whole lives, and everyone's gonna be like, 'you're the daughter of so-and-so.'" So, but I did want to be, like, in the mix, and Hunter was the most in the mix of all of the campuses -- as far as I -- it was like, right in the center of the city, and it felt like you were in a train station, and I've always loved transit, so for me it felt like it had that kind of busyness, you know, and so I felt like, yeah this place is, like, action-oriented, and I could tell there was a lot of artists there, interesting, creative people. [00:10:00] So, I became attracted to going to Hunter of all the schools, and then I ended up getting a scholarship to go there, so that helped.

Amaka: Nice. What was your major?

Lenina: My major was political science and communications.

Amaka: And then how would you describe yourself politically at the time which you, I guess, entered Hunter? So I guess at like, 18 years old.

Lenina: You know, I wasn't a radical, I was more like a Democrat, like a liberal. You know, I believed in being involved, civic engagement, that kind of thing. You know, so, I had been involved in like, ASPIRA in high school, and I helped make, create ASPIRA at my high school. So, when I got into college I was just more, like, into reforming the system, and I had really been challenged to think differently that way, you know.

Amaka: And then you said that you, one of the things that also appealed was that there was a lot of artists there. Did you consider yourself to be an artist or a creative person when you entered? Or was that just appealing to you?

Lenina: Well, one thing that's interesting is that in high school I had like, written -- I made 'zines with my friends and like, wrote poetry, and all that kind of stuff. So I remember Suheir Hammad actually came up to me, and she was like, "oh, you know, I don't know who you are, but we're having a poetry reading if you want to come." And I was like, "okay." And so (laughs) I didn't think anything of it, and I just wrote a poem and went to the reading and then all of a sudden I got integrated into this whole, like, cultural milieu of poets that were at Hunter, like, you know, like [Tokala?] and Suheir and Roger Bonair-Agard and, so, a bunch of us, Willie Perdomo -- so people would just read together and I guess in that sense I was an artist. But generally a creative person, I didn't really consider myself like an artist like an illustrator or anything like that.

Amaka: Okay. I guess I ask that because I know -- I think it was -- I read that you were working on a film or something in regards to, I guess SLAM!, yeah.

Lenina: Yeah, that was a lot later. [laughs]

Amaka: Okay. We'll get to that then. Let's see... Any, so were there any professors or, I guess, kind of, you know, people that were faculty or staff that aided to your political development when you were at Hunter? That you remember, and if not then that's fine, too. [laughter]

Lenina: Yeah, no, no, I feel like there was so many. Professor Tronto from the feminist studies department -- I don't know if there was a feminist studies, maybe it was a women's studies department. But she was a very strong feminist, and like, I don't think I had had a gay professor, a queer professor, before her, so I felt like she really integrated and explained a lot of that. You know, explained what it meant to be queer and political and all of that to me, like, for the first time. And there was Professor Ewen from the communications department, he's like the chair of the department. And he really just had a kind of -- it's interesting because he was like, predicted that there would be this huge swell in the market of communications and information technology that would transform how we looked at like, race, and class, and gender, and that, like, we needed to, like, kind of look at it from that lens, like understanding how much those things were gonna grow. And that would change how we would have to look at Marxism, and so a lot of that influenced me too and is partly why I ended up, kind of, wanting to make films or do that kind of work later on.

Amaka: How would you describe the political climate of New York at the time that you were in college? You could also, I mean, if, you could also speak to nationally if you remember any of that as well, but -- yeah -- how would you describe the political climate of New York?

Lenina: It's interesting, I think people were generally -- it was, [00:15:00] you know -- oh God, it's hard. It was very, I mean, it was very politicized -- there was, there was definitely a lot more -- or it felt like there was a lot more -- street action in the '90s in the city. And that may have been also because the way public space was regulated was not the same like it's been under Giuliani and Bloomberg, like, so kind of coming under Dinkins and going into Giuliani. I dunno, there offered like more spaces for public dissent and, like, opportunities for, like, people to do civil disobedience and things like that. Yeah, I just didn't, yeah, like, the way that the city was organized, there, you know, even how City Hall was organized was so different.

You could have, like, huge assemblies and, you know -- and things weren't, you weren't fenced off or anything like that, you could just occupy the street, you know, in a different way. I think that at the time there were a lot of, experiments, like a lot of experimentation -- I remember particularly, like, El Puente, you know, Academy for Social Justice, coming out. There was a lot of like, street organizations at the time, the Netas, the Latin Kings, the Zulu Nation, and they were exploring being more political and identifying more with like, the politics, particularly of the countries that they were from, and like, you know, like, I would say like Africa, Latin America in particular. So I feel like there was some things that people were trying to innovate, like, that I feel like kind of started to get knocked down later on and repressed in a big way, including SLAM! as like SLAM! -- you know -- it was kind of this weird, you know, like, I guess, you know, sometimes you just have these moments where things just kind of intersect and the public sector was just very angry about the budget cuts that were happening in the city -- and they were so extreme, what was proposed, across the board -- that it allowed for these alliances between like, huge parts of 1199 and SLAM!, students, you know, the students in CUNY -- it wasn't SLAM!, it was just a bunch of students in CUNY who were like, "what the hell, we can't afford this." You know, so all of them and the unions were able to come together because there was such a huge attack on the public sector, and it was so blatant, and so the city kind of erupted, right? And I feel like the march that happened -- I think it was in 1995 -- where it was like 20,000 people over in City Hall, kind of led to a lot of smaller little things that bubbled out of that, sort of how like Occupy Wall Street was this defining moment with the Zuccotti Park, I think that that was a defining moment for the city at the time, because in a long time that many people in the city hadn't come together around something, you know?

Amaka: That's a good -- I mean I haven't thought about it in that way -- but that was a good parallel to make between, because I used to, I was -- and I'll ask questions I guess in regards to that, that march I guess in '95 but -- I hadn't thought about it in that way. Comparing it to, that many people, getting 20,000 people, getting, going to city hall and, like, Occupy, like, the obvious kind of parallels between that -- so I think that was good that you said that. (laughter)

Lenina: Thanks. I feel like every time I do this I say something different.

Amaka: Well that's a good thing, you know, pull from all of those different things.

Lenina: But, you know, I was going to tell you, feel free, because I feel like when I'm talking I'm not completely articulating everything, so feel free to, like, clean up my language.

Amaka: You're fine. So can you -- you were involved in the CUNY Coalition to defend the cuts, were you --

Lenina: Yes.

Amaka: -- so can you talk about how that I guess developed and then, we'll just, yeah, just talk about how the CUNY Coalition developed, like where it came from, what was it... [00:20:00]

Lenina: I mean, I -- how I remember it from my perspective -- I was involved with NYPIRG at the time, and, you know, NYPIRG gets all of the information, very clear, around like, okay, you know, here's what's going to happen. And so we had a higher education organizer, and he presented to us, you know, these are the cuts that are gonna happen and we've gotta go lobby in city hall around these, I mean, not city hall, in Albany --

Amaka: Albany, yeah.

Lenina: -- around these cuts. And you know I was like, okay, you know, so I had that information and I remember talking to Chris Day because I was going out with this guy named Jorge and he was like, good, very good friends with Chris Day and Mac West, this other guy that was, you know, that is actually organizing now in Texas, I think. Anyway, so they, so I was just kind of like just chatting with them, and I remember Chris Day getting the information from somewhere else but was like, you know, this is, like, this is the, you know -- like he was just so fired up -- like this is like Apartheid, like this is a way for them to just clean out all the, like, youth of color from the community from this school, and we've gotta do something. And then I just remember him and maybe it was Jed Brandt and maybe a few other people just starting to staple flyers

all over the, you know, the hallways, and then I was given a set of flyers to pass out and give to my professors so that they can make announcements. And then we had a meeting, and there was like 150 people at that meeting, and it was like, just a meeting for people to say why the hell, what the hell was going on with these cuts. To let people know that there was these cuts happening and then also to hear how people felt, you know, and a lot of people were very emotional, you know. This was like, mostly people from immigrant families, first in their family to go to college, and the idea of not finishing or whatever was just so like, horrible, you know? (laughter)

Amaka: Yeah.

Lenina: So then from there, you know, I feel like because a lot of us had political backgrounds, the leadership, we kind of all, I dunno, we kind of all just found each other, like myself, Rachél, Sandra, Jed, Chris -- I'm trying to think of a lot of the, sort of, original people -- but we kind of ended up coalescing and talking a little bit more about how we could kind of keep this thing going. And then there was leadership in other colleges. Ydanis Rodriguez is a big leader at the time, Jumaane Williams was a big leader that are now on city council. And yeah, so. (laughter)

Amaka: I didn't know that's when they started to -- that's interesting.

Lenina: So Ydanis is funny because Ydanis had a very large -- he came from a Dominican Communist family on the island and was sort of influenced by that over there. And was organizing in Washington Heights, and so had already a really strong base in the Dominican community along with the base that he was building in City College, and so there was other folks, like, the -- there was on the cultural -- there was like The Welfare Poets. There's a group now called Yerba Buena that, the lead singer of that group and a few other people, they were like the leadership in City College. So City College had some leadership, Hostos had some leadership, Hunter had some leadership. I would say those were the three sort of, you know, most active campuses, and then Brooklyn College had a strong leadership too but mostly white students, some Latino students. And so, you know, those groups started to come together and meet consistently in the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts, and then I think it was before '95 when somebody just decided, like, "let's change the name to have something that's a little bit more exciting," and somebody said, you know, "Student Liberation Action Movement" -- SLAM -- and it just was like, "yeah, that's it. That's the name." You know. And that was -- that's what the coalition became [00:25:00] but I think that Hunter just ended up really being able to institutionalize it because we took over student government -- and we didn't have -- we basically got rid of people that we thought were not down with revolutionary radical politics. So at one point we had a president that, or, you know we put up a student for president that was more of a liberal, but she was kind of shady and was like, just doing things like siding with the police -- Rachél can tell you more about it, 'cause she knows -- so Rachél ended up becoming our president because she could be really trusted. So I think the other campuses took over student government but they didn't do that kind of process. They weren't that committed to, you know, they were like, "oh, you know, we've gotta let everybody in," and so that kind of watered things down a little bit in a way that didn't allow them to institutionalize a sort of more radical politic.

Amaka: So then -- so the CUNY Coalition led to the creation of SLAM!. Structurally, how, I mean, I guess, how were those two kind of bodies different? Like, was CUNY Coalition...

Lenina: CUNY Coalition was huge, okay? There was hundreds of people, hundreds. 200 people that would come to a meeting. We would have to get, you know, extra space. I think by the time we were in the mode of SLAM!, that's when things were becoming a little bit, the movement was, I guess, not so much dying down but transitioning, right, to something that was just more like about, you know, trying to maintain the pressure, but also knowing a lot of students were losing interest or feeling like, "this is gonna happen," so, you know, "we tried, we didn't win, let's move on," you know. And so, yeah, so I think that then there was less people coming and participating. It wasn't like, tremendously less, it was still, you know, 30, 40 people in the SLAM! meetings, but it wasn't like CUNY Coalition was like, yeah. I mean it was a tremendous amount of involvement.

Amaka: Okay. I guess I'm going to read this to see if it's accurate in describing, I guess, SLAM!. "It was decided by student activists who established 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 off-campus participation to invited groups. They also required that each delegation be at least half women and half people of color, in response to persistent problems with meetings dominated by outspoken white men." Is that accurate? Like, is that how you remember it happening?

Lenina: That's pretty accurate. Yeah. (laughter)

Amaka: Okay. So then was it, in SLAM!, I guess when you were there, did it -- was that consistent, did it stay that way? Like, the delegated members from each campus? Or like, 'cause you did describe how, Hunter's, it was different at Hunter because it became institutionalized in ways that it didn't at other campuses. So then in terms of, like, did it consistently stay like this in terms of the delegating four members, and you know, half women, half people of color and all of that? No?

Lenina: I don't think it stayed that way, no, no. I mean -- I think that in -- I think that what you're reading there is probably an attempt to create some structure to something that, you know, when you have a real movement it's usually pretty structureless. (laughter) And so that's what happened with the CUNY Coalition. It was just, like, a lot of people coming and then some people were also there to, you know -- they were, what do you call it, informants or people that were there to kind of instigate and cause trouble, so that always creates chaos, and so that was sort of an attempt at like -- how do we, how do we do this so that it's still very democratic but doesn't create as much chaos as, like, having these huge meetings where we don't know who's there or what their agenda is, you know? But I would say that, yeah, like, I think, I think people still did try to do that. I don't remember no four representatives from each campus. (laughter) I'd say maybe two --

Amaka: Okay.

Lenina: -- and the other two were like, "I gotta book dinner plans" or something. No, I'm just kidding, it wasn't that bad, but...

Amaka: I understand that. Sometimes it's hard to, like, write about these things, because you know, history is messy, and it's like, when you write it down, you kind of have to provide some sort of, like, you know -- [00:30:00] so I read that somewhere and I was like, "I wonder if it was really that, like, structured, like the four delegates?" (laughter) Anyway, so that's why I had to ask that. So, how would you -- I guess another thing -- were there other, with the CUNY Coalition, was it made up of -- was there participation from other organizations on campus or was it just kind of a loose, was there like, leadership from like, the Palestinian Club and BSU and like, different kind of on-campus organizations in the CUNY Coalition? Was that how --

Lenina: In the whole CUNY Coalition?

Amaka: -- yeah.

Lenina: I know at Hunter there definitely was. I mean, I think that -- I've never seen -- I mean I, when I go, because sometimes I go to campuses to speak about SLAM!, and I notice that the left groups are like, by themselves, or something, you know, like, their own little clique. And that wasn't -- that was not how we were. We had relationships with like, the Christian fellowship group, and they were like -- their choir would come sing at the demonstrations, and the step team would come perform, and, you know, the Caribbean club would come bring their DJs and the -- you know, so it was like everybody participated in that sense. Yeah, BSU, the Palestinian club, the Puerto Rican club, the -- so all of the -- I think that part of, you know -- we were effective at that, in terms of being a student government, we made it fun and we didn't make it so didactic, the, you know -- what we were trying to say in our message, so it allowed for a lot of participation from a lot of the different types of groups. The dance groups, the theatre groups -- you know, whatever -- they were all involved, one way the other. I mean, Sasa was a cheerleader, you know,

when she got involved. And like later on [Lina?], Lina got her whole sorority involved -- she was, like, in a Latina sorority, and she got them all engaged in the SLAM! politics and stuff so, I think that's how we, in a sense, we were able to maintain our sort of majority people of color, women, maintain that group in the majority because we were able to reach all of those different bases. It wasn't just the political kids, you know, together or anything.

Amaka: Okay.

Lenina: I'm not sure, I think in the other campuses it might have been a different dynamic. Like at City I think that there was definitely a lot of cultural workers and cultural folks involved, like poets and singers and dancers, but they were very politicized, you know? Like The Welfare Poets was very politicized. And it was mostly guys in City College, you know --

Amaka: I get that sense already, yeah.

Lenina: -- Yeah, yeah. And so the dynamic -- you know like in Hostos it was like, a lot of like, working class Latino folks, you know, that spoke primarily Spanish. So you know, I feel like every school -- the leadership had a different dynamic, you know?

Amaka: Okay, so how would you describe the structure of SLAM!? I know that it was probably slightly more complicated since SLAM! occupied at Hunter, kind of institutional position, as well as, I'm sure there were other people that were not involved in student government that were also members of SLAM! So how would you describe the leadership, or just the structure of SLAM! while you were there?

Lenina: You mean SLAM! the coalition?

Amaka: I mean SLAM! post-CUNY Coalition. So at the time at which it became, I guess, at the time at which it became independent, I guess, of the CUNY Coalition and the time at which it took over student government.

Lenina: I think that we always had meetings with all the campuses; there was a lot of, like, us going over to City College or City College coming over to our -- to Hunter -- or you know we tried to switch it up a little bit so we were bouncing around. But I think the structure that you laid down there was the basic guidelines that were adhered to in terms of, like, the meetings and things like that. I mean, I feel like people met every two weeks or so, you know?

Amaka: Okay, so then in terms of on Hunter's campus [00:35:00], so if the president of student government, so if SLAM!...

Lenina: We met a lot more frequently --

Amaka: Right.

Lenina: -- in Hunter. Because we were also a student government, so we were a student government and this radical organization at the same time.

Amaka: Right, so how does that work? Does that mean that the president of the student government is also, like, the president of SLAM!? Or like, how does that --

Lenina: No.

Amaka: -- okay, so like, how does that work in terms of the structure, like, on Hunter's campus? How does that look then?

Lenina: How did that work? Okay. Well, we were all assigned positions, I guess -- when I was -- I'll just talk about when we first took over student government, and I'm gonna -- Rachél can tell you about the first person,

Michelle, that we put as the president and we had to get rid of, you know -- but basically, we wanted to change the structure of student government so it could be collectivized, and they were like, "no." (laughter) They were like, "do weird stuff on your own time, but you have to keep this structure." So I think we created a couple of new positions -- we were allowed to do that -- because we wanted certain people to be able to stay engaged, and if you were working for student government you got a stipend too. So it provided an incentive for people that we wanted to cultivate as activists and organizers to stay connected. And so there was, like, the president, the vice president, the treasurer, and then there was, like, all these commissioners, right. And then there was hired staff, so there was, like, people that worked the office, and the government previous created a resource center for students which was, like, our organizing center because you could make copies there, you had computers, you know, you had space to meet, you know, any program you needed for the computer to do like, media stuff. So it was like, resource center, you know/place to make like 500,000 copies of the flyer you need for your rally or your big concert that you want to have on campus or whatever it was. And so we made decisions both as a student government and as a radical organization at the same time, which was not easy but that's probably why we met every single week for like four hours. They were really long meetings. And I think that, you know, I think that we were able to do a lot of things -- like, for instance governments of the past swindled a lot of money and would take trips abroad, you know. When we saw the batch of money, we were able to give the clubs so much more money than they had ever gotten, because in the past that money was basically stolen from them, and the student government presidents and representatives would spend it on trips and go to Florida and a lot of other places --

Amaka: What?

Lenina: -- yeah, so the -- so the clubs saw this huge increase in their personal budget for their clubs, so they were happy. Then we created, like, a council for them so that they could kind of come together and talk about activities they were doing, and it was sort of our way of addressing them more directly. We did things, like, we took -- we wouldn't allow any -- we created a system because before you had to come and, like, get a flyer stamped in order for you to distribute the flyer. We created a self-stamp system where they could come in -- anyone could stamp and go distribute a flyer. The only people that were not allowed were corporate entities, corporations, or then the Army. And we put that in our constitution, like, you cannot distribute anything, we will rip your stuff down. So it was like, we, by doing that -- we were able to, like, do that, like, basically go on any of our bulletin boards and anything we didn't like, in terms of like, that we felt like it was, like, credit card companies trying to sell to the students and get the students involved in debt, we would just rip that stuff down, because we're like, "oh, but we're the student government and that's the rules, you know, that we set up." So I think that's how we were kind of able to balance, like, having our radical politics and also being a student government. But we were at the same time also mobilizing, you know, so we kept mobilizing demonstrations to support open admissions [00:40:00], we mobilized buses to support Mumia -- the Republican National Convention, we had, you know, a huge delegation of students that went to that, that participated in that. That was like a week-long demonstration. So we were using those resources to organize, and then at the same time using the politics to inform how it was that we were going to structure this, the student government.

Amaka: So then -- so then were the -- so did SLAM! have separate meetings? So was like -- was student government meeting, which was SLAM! -- SLAM! took over student government, but then were there separate -- were there other meetings that were just, like, SLAM!? I guess SLAM! independent of student government meetings -- like were there two separate meetings --

Lenina: Eventually.

Amaka: -- oh, eventually. So it wasn't initially that way.

Lenina: Initially it wasn't that way, because I think there was still too -- I think we didn't really know what we were doing, so we were just trying to figure out -- like, you know, like, we were trying to at first just be, like, an organization -- like, whatever, these positions -- but then we realized we kind of needed to actually be a student government and do, and be -- and do a really good job at that, in order for us to stay there and use

those resources. And that's when we decided to divide up the meetings and we had SLAM! meetings and we had student government, logistical meetings and stuff.

Amaka: Okay, and then so then how were -- so the the SLAM! Meetings -- how were the SLAM! meetings then? So the, once they were divided, what were the SLAM! meetings like? Like was it similar in terms of, like, agenda and, you know -- was it like a collective vote? Like how did that work, I guess, differently then from student government?

Lenina: Well SLAM! meetings were open to the students and the student body, so, you know, we would have between 15 to 30 people consistently. If there was a major action, we would have more -- a lot more, maybe 50, 60 people -- and, you know, and we made decisions there about, like, like if there was other protests happening in the city, like, "oh there's this big police brutality protest happening," or you know, "somebody wants us to take up something about one of the political prisoners," or, you know -- so we would make those kinds of decisions, like, what were we gonna participate in that, how we were gonna participate, what kind of capacity did we have. And then we would get a lot of requests too, like, you know, the Taxi Workers Alliance wants to use the space, do we have space we can lend them. Or this group needs -- they need money. Can we give them some -- not money, but, like, let's say that they need like, supplies for a rally, like, you know -- can we lend them like, our, you know, our bullhorns and, like, you know, our, like, martial outfits, and like, things like that. So yeah, so there's just, like, a lot of decisions made about that and how to engage --

Amaka: How would you describe the...?

Lenina: -- and the facilitation was rotating too, so it was always, like, different. Or I think at one point we had like, two facilitators that would stay for like a month, and then we would rotate to another set of two facilitators.

Amaka: Okay. How would you describe the political ideology of SLAM!? Was it just, like, left or radical, or would you say, like, you know, socialist, communist. You know, it seemed to me that there was a variety of different kind of political ideologies present in SLAM! --

Lenina: Yes.

Amaka: -- but how would you -- okay, you would agree with that. (laughter) So everyone -- I mean it was left, but there were so many different -- yeah, like different, you know, some people might identify as communists, socialists, nationalists.

Lenina: Yeah, yeah.

Amaka: And then how would you describe the racial, class, and gender composition of SLAM!?

Lenina: We were mostly women of color in the leadership, except for two guys: Chris and Jed. (laughs) And Chris and Jed had played -- you know, they had a lot of experience organizing -- so they played a big role in the leadership. And I think that organizations like STORM would come and be like, "why are these white guys playing such a big role," [00:45:00] you know what I mean, but for us it was just like, because they're like, you know what I mean, like, for us it was like, they're just part of the crew, you know, like, we're used to them being around, you know, we're used to, like, them kind of like rolling deep with us. But so I think that, like, other people found that kind of problematic, but internally we didn't find it problematic, you know. I mean, I guess, like, other people would argue with me on that too, definitely. (laughter)

Amaka: Well I will be asking people, so I'll see what everyone says about that.

Lenina: And I probably have changed my position on that thing, like, a few times. Yeah, because I think, I think I'm even mixed on it, you know, because I do, I do realize that they had a lot of an influence, and they weren't always right about things, but they were also really big mentors -- and I don't think -- and I also don't want to, like, minimize their contribution either, you know?

Amaka: And I -- that's a good segue -- because I don't really know exactly how to articulate this question -- but I remember I was reading something in the interview -- that Suzy interviewed, you know, her interview with you -- where she was mentioning how, I guess questions around how SLAM! negotiated the presence of white folks in the organization. So for instance, there are some organizations if you are male or if you are, like, white or straight, it's like, you're, like you have to confront your privilege if you're going to occupy this space, right? Did that happen in SLAM!? Like, what were the conversations around that, if you remember? You know, what -- I guess, you know -- I guess also in relationship to stuff that I've read about the CUNY Coalition, it kind of tracks this line about, like, a lot of, you know, lefty white men, like, dominating meetings -- I don't know if that actually happened with the CUNY Coalition but I read some of that -- and so, how, how was, yeah, like, how did y'all deal with the white boys in SLAM!? Like, how -- were they just cool, were they, you know, were they... (sighs)

Lenina: Well, actually there was at one point, there was this feeling that we needed to kind of have our own organization as people of color. And so I remember there was a few students -- Orlando Green and this other guy, John Kim, Kamau Franklin --

Amaka: Was Kamau in SLAM!?

Lenina: -- Kamau was in SLAM!, yeah. (laughter) But it's interesting because Kamau was also the head of this group -- of the Student Power Movement. So we created, like, a only people of color group that was sort of running parallel to SLAM! called the Student Power Movement, that we were in like for a while, but it just felt weird because we were like, in SLAM! and in the student power movement and the work was the same, but the only distinction was that we were people of color-only group. So after a while, it just, it like -- the purpose for being together just wasn't compelling enough, and we ended up folding and just kind of being like, you know, and honestly I think Kamau was a big part of that, he was sort of, like, "we should just all work together," and like, figure, you know what I mean, and like figure this out somehow, you know. I mean I think that that -- that whole ground rule around stepping up and stepping back and that kind of thing helped a lot. There was some serious checking of the white boys along the way because -- you know who could tell you a lot more about this would be Sandra Barros -- but at one point there was, like, people, like someone felt -- I'm not gonna say who, but there was somebody, you know, very close to us, white boy -- and he was kind of reporting back to his organization and like, writing papers and things like that about how they were, you know, implementing their ideology in this people of color organization. [00:50:00] And so there was -- that got found out and it just became very problematic and it caused a lot of tension for a while, but it was something that had to happen, and he ended up apologizing for doing that, and a couple of the other people that were in our organization ended up doing that as well. You know, because it was patronizing to be like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Lenina: -- we're here to kind of --

Amaka: Indoctrinate.

Lenina: -- Yeah, like, implement a, you know -- That's pure colonization of people. So there was that kind of checking. Or like, you know, kind of, people kind of bringing their arrogance and, like, their kind of, like, like, "I wanna talk! I wanna..." you know like that kind of stuff, and so that, that kind of, those kinds of things were checked as well. A lot. And I think, I think we -- we checked each other a lot over, you know, making ignorant statements, and like -- but there was so much love there that we didn't -- I think after that kind of initial thing of like the Student Power movement, and then kind of coming back into SLAM! there wasn't that much of those kind of like, spaces of only women or spaces of only people of color. I think we were generally moving away -- we started moving away from that a little bit, even though we kind of -- we went through it -- we did that.

Amaka: Would you -- do you think that a lot of -- I guess you can answer this regarding leadership or general membership. Were people -- was this people's first time kind of being activists or oriented in those types of

activities, or were people -- did people come from like political, you know, radical families, or was it just a range or a mixture?

Lenina: I'd say a lot of the leadership were mixed race, people of color that came from radical families, or white folks that came from radical families -- that were red diaper babies. But interestingly enough, white folks that were also raised in majority people of color communities. So, you know, they had a different kind of relationship to their whiteness, I guess, you know, or had already been through having to challenge it in a way that like -- let's say you came from, you know, I dunno, Minnesota and you just -- this is the first time you're coming to CUNY and the first time you're seeing brown people, you know that's a very different relationship --

Amaka: Absolutely.

Lenina: -- in connection to that, so you know -- but we, it's funny, but we attracted people that were very green too, you know. And, and, and there was definitely, I think that also we had Kai, [Lumumba Barrow], Ashanti, who were there and served as mentors, and they had been Black Panthers, so they also, kind of -- let me get this, because this is my daughter probably. Hello! I love you! I want you, too. I see you later, okay? Daddy's coming to pick you up today. (inaudible) Bye baby, I love you. (inaudible) Okay, I'm doing an interview, and then (inaudible). When she's with her dad, my mom always calls me so that I can say hi to her. "I want you!" (laughter) Okay...

Amaka: Okay, let's see what I was gonna say. Okay, so how would you describe -- I don't know if that's a good question -- Yeah, how would you describe the different strategies that SLAM! used throughout its tenure. So you've mentioned, you know, direct action, like protests, that type of thing. But I also know, you know -- just through reading and talking to folks like -- you had the high school organizer program, and --

Lenina: I do, no, I just want to -- because I was, because I got the call when we were talking -- but I think that the involvement of like, former Black Panthers and former Young Lords, and the professors, right, like Professor Carter who was, like, really well-versed in terms of like civil rights and in terms of history. They were really helpful in, like, helping us [00:55:00] as young people come up with a political ideology and also, like, helping people that were very fresh and didn't really have a political ideology or didn't come from a political background, but were working class and were people of color and wanted to do stuff and wanted to find out what the hell was going on in the world -- helping to develop and mentor, you know, I mean, they played a huge role in that and it was really helpful because, you know, students were so like, "we want to do this! We want to do that!" you know what I mean, like we're not making that kind of time we really need to make when you, when you want to build and mentor people. (inaudible)

Amaka: So you mention Kai and Ashanti as mentors and you said Professor Carter --

Lenina: Yeah.

Amaka: -- what department was he?

Lenina: He was sociology. Yeah.

Amaka: Okay.

Lenina: He'd be an interesting one to -- if he's still around.

Amaka: Yeah, I know, I'm, it's -- I've been trying to and I may, you know, there may be a question further down, even though you've already answered it, about like, the role of -- yeah like mentors, whether it was like radical faculty or staff or whoever, and, you know, I hope to ask that question to everyone so that I can hopefully get some names and maybe track down some folks that may be still around. I don't know. Because it would be nice to talk to some of those people.

Lenina: Yeah.

Amaka: So yeah, how would you describe the different strategies that SLAM! used -- and maybe strategy's not a good word, because -- but you know, as I've mentioned, like you, SLAM! seemed to be very involved in, like, direct action, so organizing rallies and protests, but also, you know, there's a high school organizer program, you know, like you say you guys were constantly mobilizing. I know that there's a lot of P.E., like a lot of political study, and stuff like that as well so, I guess what else, or how would you describe the different -- the range of activities that SLAM! engaged in?

Lenina: I think early on we did have political education, we've always had that kind of as a component. And you know, having kind of rotating facilitation around different readings -- which was always interesting because it was like, you know, you had your white Marxists and they would want to push that, and you had your women of color and they were, like, want to push like, you know, Cherrie Moraga and like Gloria Anzaldúa and that kind of stuff, and then you had, you know what I mean, it felt, it felt like, you know, you had your black nationalists, they would put Marcus Garvey up in there -- so it was just like, the variety that we had politically and racially and gender-wise and all that, it all came into how we did the political education as well. You know, and we were pretty -- we pretty much embraced it as best as we could, so that was definitely a part of things. We would do a lot of -- I think we were generally like, very activist. We weren't organizers in the sense that we were like, okay we have an open admissions campaign, now let's -- you know, I think later on we started to think that way a little bit, like maybe some of these like Midwest Academy strategies of, like, having a power analysis is, like, what we need -- but I think early on we were very -- we were big on the culture front. We did a lot of poetry readings, we did concerts, we did panels, we did just events about health and healing and stuff like that. We had a free lunch program (laughs) -- which is a free lunch program -- we had a free lunch program for students, so we actually bought a whole bunch of lunch for students and just gave out sandwiches, you know. So we did like, a lot of things like that, you know, and then we would get engaged with a lot of community organizations. The high school organizing committee came later, like in 2000.

Amaka: Okay.

Lenina: Yeah so that wasn't during -- so I'd say early on it was, like, a lot about, like, getting involved in political movements in the city and the world and making those connections, and that was -- I think that was really important to us, because we knew a lot of the organizations in the city couldn't deal with like, Palestine. [01:00:00] They couldn't take on, you know, imperialism the way that we could as students and make those connections and create those relationships, so it's like, we were engaged with a lot of that. But then later on we got more into like, people, the students wanted to be more direct, like they were like, well, what are we doing in our communities? Like, that's nice, we're supporting something halfway across the world, or like, we're supporting the EZLN in Mexico, but like, what are we really doing here? And I think actually the Zapatistas' ideas around like -- focus locally on what you're -- be radical where you are was, like, really influential on us and what helped to start the high school organizing program, which had a lot of focus on prison justice issues in particular.

Amaka: In terms of -- so you just said that it's not like you had an organizing campaign around open admissions. You graduated in '97?

Lenina: Yeah

Amaka: So before open admissions was ended, I guess. So do you remember how that attack on open admissions, like, emerged, like you know building, I guess, over time, or was there talk about that when you were still there as a student?

Lenina: Was there talk about the end of open admissions when I was still there? No, you're right, that talk started happening more when I left school, but I came back -- I think it was like 2001 or something, so I was at the tail end of it, like right when it was about to be done with. And you know, when I came back I noticed a significant difference, racially in particular, in the way that the school, the types of students that were going there.

Amaka: At Hunter? The demographics changed --

Lenina: The demographics changed in a big way. And so I noticed that immediately. I think that what was really effective as a strategy on CUNY's part was that they created this sort of structure where they had these -- their flagship schools, right? And then they had, like, the CUNY Honors program and then they had their two-year schools, and so it really created a system where if you weren't, you know, if you didn't have the grades to get into a four-year school, you could go to a two-year school first and then you would be transferred into a four-year school, and that whole system was pretty effective at pacifying the students I think, because it wasn't like they were going to be completely cut off from going to a CUNY school -- that just meant they had to spend six years there instead of four, if they were full-time students, which nobody was. (laughs) Everyone ended up spending like eight years in college.

Amaka: Yeah, and I was reading the other day -- there was an article about CUNY in, I think it was the Village Voice, and they did this whole thing about how, you know, people who are in community colleges, in remediation, having their funding cut off and, like, having the limits on the amount of time they can spend in remediation and, like, how, you know, that was, you know, affecting whether folks could transfer or not, and like, all of this stuff, you know, is completely tied to -- this stuff is just further down the line. And just the ways in which people are graduating from high schools in New York and not -- most people who are graduating need so much remediation to even get to the four-year colleges that they just stay stuck at that community college level. You know, so it was just, anyway, I can send it to you (laughter) but it was in the Village Voice. Okay, so were you, I mean, 'cause you seemed really involved in SLAM! because you were both in student government, involved in the other things that SLAM! were doing -- were you involved in any other organizations when you were at Hunter? Or any other kind of activities while you were at Hunter?

Lenina: In the school? Or just like --

Amaka: Well, generally. School and outside of school.

Lenina: -- I'm trying to think. I mean I was really involved with like, some theatre stuff in school, like they formed, like, a children's theatre, you know, I guess, group or something, and I was an actress in that group for a little while [01:05:00] so, you know. And then I was also -- I also started a few clubs, like I started a Latino club, I started like a (inaudible) club and stuff like that on campus, because, you know, I was sort of really interested in my culture and then trying to connect that somehow politically. Some of my friends were like, "you created fun groups." (laughter) That's kind of true, I guess. I dunno. Anyway, but yeah, so I did some of that. I was -- I got involved with, like, Sister to Sister, but I think that was -- was that, oh no, that was around that time, yeah -- that was around the time I was still in school. Like I was on the board of that group and so I was in Sister to Sister when it was just, like, about developing a curriculum for women of color, and we had, like, young women come on like Saturdays usually -- maybe between 10 to 12, 13 to 17-year old girls, and it was awesome, it was really awesome. We did an amazing curriculum with them and we fed them really well too, we had really healthy food and all that stuff. But yeah -- so I was on the board at the time with that and then later on it became an organization and stuff like that.

Amaka: Okay, what was -- and this has probably changed over time, but like -- what was the perception of SLAM! by other Hunter college students, so, you mention --

Lenina: (laughs) That's a tricky one.

Amaka: -- Yeah, I mean 'cause you mention at first that particularly when SLAM! went into student government, other organizations started getting more money and stuff like that, then of course it would be favorable, and it seems as if the Hunter SLAM! did a lot to make those connections across different groups and trying to kind of bring folks in, but what was generally the perception that Hunter students had of SLAM!, or what you think the perception was?

Lenina: I mean, I think it changed over the years because the college was changing, right? So the demographics of the college was changing, the kinds of students that were going there were changing, plus the

administration had the like -- pretty, how can I say -- pretty sophisticated operation to get us out, you know? And it took them a few years, but they won eventually. So remember, SLAM! was around for eight years, right, in student government. So I would say -- probably the last four years -- the whole thing of SLAM! being on other campuses, that really died down completely, you know. SLAM! was really about Hunter College. I don't know if that happened after, like, the first three years or something, but I would probably say that, I would say probably after the third year it just wasn't really like something that was across CUNY, you know? So that in itself made it lose impact. I think that, you know, generally Hunter students were pretty progressive and radical, and so some students even came to Hunter to find out what SLAM! was and all that, but I think that some of the core issues around like -- you know, our positions around imperialism and colonialism -- I think that we had more trouble, right, like particularly reaching, like, let's say, like Israeli, like Israelites, you know, like folks that were very pro-the Israeli state and they would see something that was like, Palestinian flag up in the office, and you know, that kind of stuff was always, like, a tough -- a tough thing for folks to get around. And yeah, I think some people thought we were too radical, that we, especially again in the later years, "SLAM! should just be a student government, it's inefficient, it's not really," you know, "it could be doing a lot better," you know. And I think that there was sort of, towards the later years, less enthusiasm, a little more of like, you know, kind of getting comfortable being institutionalized, not really going out on campus a lot and talking to students [01:10:00] the way that you did before initially, where you were, like, practically all the time in the hallways talking to students. You know, all of a sudden you're, like, in the office behind a computer most of the time talking to people who are not even in the college, you know, but relating more to the community organization and the city and things like that. So I feel like, yeah, like as it became more institutionalized, it lost a certain kind of presence among the students, and then the students became a little bit resentful around that -- but also, yeah, as the school demographics changed there was probably some more conservative students that were coming on to campus as well. Which I think kind of was like, you know, like, one thing feeds the other, right? So it's like, you're like, "I don't feel like mobilizing the students because these students are not the students that were the students when we first started doing all this stuff," but you know, but on the other hand it's like -- yeah, the students feel that cold shoulder, too -- so it's like, how do you bridge that.

Amaka: You described that the administration had a pretty sophisticated operation to get you guys out, like what was that?

Lenina: You know, I can't reveal my sources, but I know for a fact that Board of Trustees was having meetings and that our name came up a number of times as a group that needed to be dealt with and eradicated, and that a strategy needed to be put in place to get rid of the organization. And so, you know, the thing is that for so many years, SLAM! pretty much ran uncontested, and then -- but then by the eighth year, it was like eight years already, people are like, "yeah, let somebody else get a try," you know, and so the students tried their hardest, but it just wasn't powerful enough, you know. The administration was basically supporting another party and giving them, like, access in a way that we didn't, and then that election was also the first time that there was machines --

Amaka: Ballot?

Lenina: Online ballot? Maybe it was an online ballot, but it was like a machine ballot, and it was the first time they had ever used that.

Amaka: Before it was, like, the paper?

Lenina: No, no, the old-school voting machines -

Amaka: Oh, with the lever?

Lenina: With the lever, yeah, so that's what we'd always used, or the paper, yeah, just the paper. So this was the first time that they were using this kind of electronic system, so there was also people like, "we probably won and they just said that we didn't," so there's just some of those discussions as well.

Amaka: So I guess there's two questions: so why do you think SLAM! lasted as long as it did, and why do you think it ended when it did? Like, what things do you think led to the end of SLAM!, but also, for a student organization it lasted pretty long at Hunter.

Lenina: I mean, I think that because it did come from, like, a mass movement of students, it wasn't just like, a couple of students are interested in student government and want to use this to put on their resume and they're running to get to student government. It came from, you know, a movement of students of all different kinds of backgrounds interested in so many different types of things and religions and all that, and so then I think that people pretty much knew that, and then every year as, like, when you have to run SLAM! again and get new students into the positions -- because people would graduate and they couldn't be in the position any longer -- and the new students would come in. There was a really strong sense of like, passing down a set of political and cultural values that people kind of pretty willingly adhered [01:15:00] to, you know? And I think that it felt like -- it didn't feel you know, stuffy, or like it was closing you in or anything -- like the kinds of people that were attracted to SLAM! were very open-minded and were about trying to get you to open up even more, you know, and so, you know, and people wouldn't be against things that other left -- like people were not against being sexy or being cute or being fun or dancing all night long, you know what I mean? There wasn't, there wasn't this feeling of "you have to be committed to this way of learning things," and there wasn't a seriousness -- it was fun. You know? So I think that that kind of kept people engaged and attracted to it, and then you know, I think that having a structure, right? So it's like, there's something that people can plug into and have a role immediately -- so it's like, is also something that helps lead to longevity, I think, is there's jobs, there's real jobs that people can take on, you know, and that was the case until they got, you know they were kicked out of student government.

Amaka: So then was -- how long, I guess -- SLAM! ending, SLAM! being kicked out of student government and SLAM! ending as a organization -- that wasn't a simultaneous thing, was it? Or do you know, I mean because you were in there earlier?

Lenina: No, SLAM! did try to stay alive for another two years, but it was just not -- there was -- the energy to do it wasn't strong enough to keep it going. I think people started meeting to kind of, you know -- sort of like the SLAM! elders or the SLAM! OGs and the new Gs -- and we had these kind of loose meetings that we would have, but it just wasn't enough to keep people together because people had gotten used to having a place to go -- you know there was like an office and there was space on the campus and, you know, you didn't have that anymore and now you had to meet in people's houses and you had to kind of, like, figure out how to get together, and you know, so just, people just were like, "I'm too busy, I got this to do, I got that to do, I don't want to make any time for it." You know?

Amaka: I've also heard that, you know -- particularly after the student government was lost -- a lot of SLAM! elders or OGs were kind of like -- well, they were more invested in other struggles that were happening, maybe not specific to on-campus. Do you think that that's true in terms of, like, why there wasn't as much energy dedicated to what was happening on campus, after the student government was lost?

Lenina: Yeah, yeah, I mean I think that was even an issue while students were on campus -- especially in the final years the students were like, "yeah, we still want to focus on the issues that we have on campus and the struggles around security and all of that," and people were more interested, still more interested in like, you know, political prisoner struggles or like, the prison industrial complex and what are we gonna do about that, and you know, more community struggles. So there was definitely, like, internal division around those things as well.

Amaka: I have a couple more questions -- because we're already over at this point -- I hope that, I mean like ten more minutes?

Lenina: I can stay, yeah, a couple more minutes, no problem --

Amaka: So...

Lenina: -- I already spoke to my daughter, that's my major priority.

Amaka: So SLAM! members donated (inaudible), so SLAM! -- I don't know who specifically donated all the stuff to Tamiment -- but, you know, there's a whole bunch of like, boxes of SLAM! stuff at Tamiment. What are your feelings about, I guess, various efforts to save those materials and document what happened during that time?

Lenina: What are our efforts to save the materials?

Amaka: Well, what are your feelings about it? --

Lenina: Oh, my feelings.

Amaka: -- You know, a lot of documents were donated to NYU Tamiment -- like over twenty boxes of SLAM! stuff there. And then, I guess, generally, what are your thoughts on documenting -- whether it's saving those materials [01:20:00] or just documenting what happened during that time?

Lenina: I mean I think it's super important, you know. I, I mean, this -- I guess I'm trying to get at what kind of answer are you looking for?

Amaka: I'm not looking for a particular answer. I guess I'm just -- it's almost, in some ways it's unique, you know -- most, particularly student organizations, they don't save stuff, you know what I'm saying? It's not like, or like -- they may have some stuff, but they're not necessarily going to donate it to a particular place so that that materials are saved. Like I think about when I was in college and the different organizations that I was in, like I still have a couple things but most of that stuff (laughter) either got thrown away or got passed on to someone else or -- you know what I'm saying? So I think that to me it's unique that SLAM! saved so much stuff. I guess I'm just wondering, like, you know, I just want people to speak to that, you know -- that's just interesting to me. (laughter) I mean do you think that, you know, considering that SLAM! was institutionalized -- do you think that's just another effort to, pass -- even though SLAM! no longer exists -- it's another way of institutionalizing SLAM! by documenting it so extensively -- it's like, this thing existed, it's a way of institutionalizing it. So, anyway...

Lenina: Yeah, I mean, I think people -- I think there was always an effort to document -- and a lot of the SLAMistas, I mean -- Jed Brandt, who made the Occupy Wall Street Journal, he was running the major Hunter College newspaper at the time, the Envoy, you know? And of course used it as a political tool, you know? Which is really, like, the Hunter Envoy -- the spirit -- running a newspaper is going to help you document really well. Because it's a living, yeah, it's a living, breathing document of what's going on in your movement. And at the time, there wasn't really an internet where you could digitally put things up, or, you know -- I think we did end up -- we did have a website -- it was really poorly run, it was like, global city, it was like one of those global cities. So there was definitely a lot of people interested in media documentation that were part of SLAM! and that really focused on that, Suzy included. But I think that people generally felt like SLAM! was a pretty special thing -- like you said -- like very influential in people's lives, you know, as a foundation for what they were going to do politically after they left college, you know, or, yeah. Or after they left the organization.

Amaka: You already described that SLAM! was connected to a lot of organizations off of campus, right, so you mentioned a few unions and Sister to Sister and, like, a bunch of organizations. It seems to me that SLAM! is emerging at this time in which, you know, like, it's almost like the beginning of, like, the non-profit -- and it may be before that -- but it seems like a lot of these organizations that SLAM! was connected to have since become non-profits and things like that. And so would you say that SLAM! was really embedded in that works off of campus and, like, those almost things like a pre-non-profit network or whatever. Would you say that SLAM! was embedded in those types of networks and connections with other organizations off campus?

Lenina: Yeah, and I think that because they were newly forming they were like, a lot more radical than they are now. Like, El Puente was just starting, Make the Road by Walking a few years later was just starting, you

know, Bushwick Sister to Sister was just starting -- so a lot of them were still sort of these grassroots, these grassroots seedlings of organizations, and some of them have become, like, supermarkets of organizations now (laughter), you know, that like, they're very clear about what they're fighting for and when they're gonna win, you know. But at the time, they were really just, you know, like, trying to figure out how to mobilize in the community, and the SLAM! politics on some level influencing that, you know. Some organizations more than others, you know.

Amaka: So what were, in terms of [01:25:00], you know, work or activist work that you did after Hunter, like what -- I don't want to just say jobs, since so many of us do organizing that we're not paid for -- but what kind of work were you involved in after your experience in SLAM!? Like do you think that SLAM! influenced the direction that you went in terms of, like, the types of work or things that you got involved with afterwards?

Lenina: Yes, of course. Can I go to the bathroom?

Amaka: Yeah of course (laughter)

Lenina: I'll be right back.

Amaka: Think long and hard about that question.

**[New audio file begins]**

Lenina: Wanted, you know, that we were from that tradition, you know -- and I think that, like, that tendency was kind of brought into anything that we did. So I mean, I worked in Sunset Park for a while organizing, like -- focusing gangs -- and I did work with them around like, kind of like, youth-on-youth violence and we helped, like, form a truce amongst the different gangs, and then, like, also working a lot amongst the youth organizations and, like, I was part of, like, a non-profit organization that was pretty big. It had, like, a beacon program and so -- we ran like, bilingual education programs, you know, ESL classes, GED classes -- but we were able to have the flexibility in that program in Sunset Park to like, you know, bring a lot of the former SLAMistas, former Black Panthers, former young -- to, you know, talk to folks in the GED classes, in the ESL classes, to the leadership of the gangs and their families and all those people. That work changed a lot when the zero-tolerance laws happened because -- in terms of Giuliani -- because the gangs were no longer allowed in the schools or in daycare programs or in beacon programs, so it made it really difficult to keep organizing because they were like, locked out, and we could get in trouble for organizing, so, so yes -- I feel like that's a big way, like I always kind of kept my connections with all of that network of people that were in SLAM! to bring them into that work. But also then I went into like, doing more media work and all of that, and I think, I think that kind of there was sort of a, "follow your dreams, believe in dreams," -- that's a SLAM! poster from back in the day.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Lenina: So there was that kind of feeling, like, you should do whatever you love and are passionate about, you know, so, like, nobody felt like they couldn't do whatever they wanted and at the same time not integrate their politics. So I think that was my way of kind of following my dreams, you know, becoming, like, a mostly, like, film communications and into that world -- and then was like, I'm not -- this is not completely my dream (laughter) and kind of leaving it and coming back to do community work, but yeah. I mean, yeah, I guess most of my career I've done communications in non-profits and leadership and organizing and stuff like that, so.

Amaka: I mean, this really is like the last question, but in which ways do you think SLAM! shaped you, like, politically? And I guess more generally, like, what do you think you learned from your time in SLAM!?

Lenina: I think the most important lesson that I learned from SLAM! was that politics is cultural, so it's not ideological, you know. It's not about what you believe or about fairness or justice, you know, it's also about salsa, merengue, and hip-hop, you know, the Harlem Shake and whatever, you know? It's about what moves people, right? And so, I think, yeah, I mean I feel like maybe that's because so many of us were

communicators and artists, but I think that the effectiveness that we had in transforming people's lives was because we reached them at a cultural level, not just at a level of like, relating to them with a set of like, you know, political principles around, let's say, a more equitable economy or a more equitable society or anything like that.

Amaka: Okay, is there anything else that you feel like you'd like to say about that time --

Lenina: Yeah, no, I mean, I think also being, like -- the power of women and women's intuition [00:05:00] and women coming together, you know, is so crucial and key. And particularly women of color, I think, is just like, the -- you know, keeping your eye to always understanding the sexual and interpersonal connection and violence and all of that is like, also, was like, something that SLAM! was unique at, I feel like unique at, because that was our leadership. Where so many organizations, that wasn't necessarily their leadership -- maybe they had a lot of those people in leadership roles, but that wasn't the core of who they were, you know?

Amaka: So it's (inaudible) you mentioned like, a workshop or a forum or a panel on, like, healing and those types of things -- are you saying that that, you know, because it was led by woman of color, opened up more space to do those types of, kind of, more holistic things, rather than just strictly, you know, a rally or something like that, like broadening I guess what many consider to be politics?

Lenina: Yeah, definitely.

Amaka: Alright, well that's it. If there's anything that comes to mind -- that you feel like you should -- you know, just email me or something like that, and I really appreciate it. You're the first official interview...

END OF AUDIO