



A project of the Professional Staff Congress Archives Committee

Interview with Rachel LaForest
Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

October 20, 2020
New York, NY

[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: Can you state your age?

Rachel LaForest: I am 37 years old.

Amaka: How do you racially identify?

Rachel: I identify as a black woman.

Amaka: And how do you -- OK, you answered your gender. So how do you identify your sexual orientation?

Rachel: Heterosexual.

Amaka: And your marital status?

Rachel: Single.

Amaka: And how many children do you have?

Rachel: Two. One by birth, one by relationship.

Amaka: OK, cool. So can you describe the neighborhood and, or community that you grew up in?

Rachel: Sure. I am a product -- I identify as a black woman, I am a product of a biracial marriage. Haitian immigrant father, and a New York, Polish Jew, who is my mother. They settled in a working-class garden apartment community in eastern Queens. Suburban, to some degree. My mother ran the tenant association there. Growing up, it was very white, mostly Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrant, working-class families. By the time I was in elementary school, it had begun to change and become much more Latino and black, not over the white element, but in addition to. There were more Latino and black families that were moving into the neighborhood. And now, I live in the same neighborhood, and it is probably about half south Asian, mainly from Bangladesh and India. But, growing up, I was the only person of my kind. I was the only biracial child in my neighborhood, until I was in the fourth grade, and then there were two other families in the neighborhood who had mixed children, as well. So largely white, first- and second-generation immigrants, working-class.

Amaka: OK. Both of your parents were politically active and engaged. Can you speak to the work that your parents did, politically, and how that may have influenced your own ideas in the work that you have done?

Rachel: Sure. My mother grew up in a very intentionally communist household. Her mother, my maternal grandmother, grew up in the [Copes?], which was a socialist-communist enclave in the Bronx in New York, and met my maternal grandfather through union-organizing work. He also, he grew up in a less-politicized home, but had developed politics on his own accord through college and through his work. He was a union representative; he was a union-organizer. And so, my mother came from that particular background. She ran, since my birth, and to this day, continues to run the tenant association in my neighborhood, and so there was a lot of housing politics when I was growing up. A lot of politics around socialism and communism, a lot of conversations around worker protections, workers' rights, fair wages and things like that. My father, Haitian immigrant came here when he was in his mid- to late-twenties, 27 years old. He grew up in Haiti. His father was a diplomat under Baby Doc, and while my paternal grandfather was a diplomat, my father and his brothers were doing a lot of political organizing as

young teenagers, some of them young teenagers. There were five of them in total. My father, in his mid-20s, had been doing a lot of political work around socialism in Haiti, and my father's family was given the choice to stay and for my father to maintain his activities along with his brothers, and face whatever consequences came with that, or to leave. And so, staying meant probably death for everyone, and so they chose to come to the U.S. And so, in addition to the tenant-organizing and the very strong union ethic, I had a huge dose of solidarity politics in my upbringing. Education around immigrants and immigrants' rights, [00:05:00] around imperialism, and the role that the United States has played in countries throughout the world, so, not just the poverty, racism, sexism, that exists in the United States, but the way that imperialism pulled that outwards to extend to the rest of the globe. I was sent to Haiti every summer growing up, and that was in an effort for -- my father felt very strongly about keeping my brother and I connected to those roots and those traditions, and learning about what the material conditions in Haiti actually look like, and why. A lot of anti-military sentiments in my family, given the fact that the Marines landed in 1804 -- I'm sorry, 2004, yes. 1904, I'm sorry, 1904. And really changed the dynamic in Haiti. So both of my parents very rooted in left politics. I've always described myself as a red diaper baby. It would be on my parents, at least on my mother's side, to her parents and actually her parents before them, so my grandparents on my mother's side were socialists. For my father, it was more of a learning and a realization that he and his brothers came to, given the reality that they lived in, in Haiti.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: But, I think that that summarizes my upbringing. So you know, I was sent to Cuba at 14, because my parents wanted me to understand that what the embargo was about, why people talked about Cuba the way that they did, what the reality of the country looked like, and I was sent to an international camp of young people from around the world, so that there was conversation about what politics and people's material conditions looked like, globally, and I didn't just have a very limited, Western, American viewpoint.

Amaka: Right, right. OK, what was your parents' education level, growing up, and what type of work did they do?

Rachel: Both of my parents were not college graduates until I was in my late teens -- I'm sorry, my mother graduated with her bachelors, I was 14, my dad, 16. So teenage years.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: And what was the second part of that, what did they do?

Amaka: Yeah.

Rachel: OK. So my father actually, upon coming to this country, got a job at Queens... Christ, what's the name of it... Queens County Hospital? Yeah. Queens County Hospital, public hospital in Queens, along with his other brother, my uncle Henry, and he did a short stint there, and then he delivered plastic [hood?] covers until I was 12. So you know, the plastic covers that go over furniture?

Amaka: Yeah, couches and stuff.

Rachel: He had an off-the-books job delivering plastic slip covers until I was 12 years old, and then went to school, I think, when I was about 9, and after I was 12, got offered a job doing union-organizing at District Council 17-07, the union for child care workers. [And home and healthy?]. I think they represent [foremen?], as well. Public sector union. And he was there up until two years ago, so, for about... almost 20 years. My mother, when I was growing up, worked at the same hospital, that's actually where my parents met. God damnit, she's going to kill me that I don't remember the exact name. Queens hospital. She worked in the pediatrics clinic. She was... what's the word...? She did medical billing and took care of charts and files. She went back to school when I was in, again, around the same time as my dad, and got a degree in education, and then she went to teach at Rikers. So she actually first starting teaching labor history at Cornell, labor college, and then she got a job at Rikers, teaching for the GED, and now teaches at Phoenix House, also still for former prisoners. She teaches the GED, so she's been teaching since I'm... oh, I don't know, maybe 20 years old?

Amaka: OK. [00:10:00]

Rachel: Maybe 18 years old, yeah.

Amaka: OK, cool. What -- why did you choose to attend Hunter?

Rachel: So I went to high school for writing. I still liked to write a lot when I was in junior high school, and I did not want to go to my zoned high school because I was an academic nerd, but socially, I hung out with all of the [derefects?] (laughs) (inaudible) being recorded... But, you know, I tell my stepdaughter all the time, I was a cool fucking nerd, you can be a cool nerd. Like, you can hang out and roll with the best of them, and still kick ass academically and really invest in study. So I didn't want to go to my zoned high school because I was afraid that I would cut all the time.

Amaka: (laughs) OK.

Rachel: Because, in order to hang out with that batch of friends was very -- you know, the pull, the desire to hang out with that batch of friends was very strong, and so, I went to a high school outside of my zone, John Browne

High School, they had a center for writing program, which I participated in and loved. When I was applying for colleges, I knew that I wanted to stay local to New York, because in high school, I had gotten very involved in a number of different organizing efforts. One was around the, sort of the defamation of the Haitian community around AIDS. When I was coming up in high school, it was a big thing that AIDS had come from Haiti, and so I had been involved in some of the organizing within the Haitian community around beating back that narrative, and that stereotype, and I knew that there weren't too many other places that had large Haitian communities, except for Boston and Miami, and I wanted to stay close -- also, at the time, my brother was in pretty bad shape, and beginning a drug habit, and so I wanted to be able to stay close to my family. And Hunter had, from what I understood, Hunter had a very rich tradition in sort of being a flagship school around activism. Not in the time that I had gone to school, but in the 70s, and, you know, the reputation of the black and Puerto Rican studies department there, and some of the professors in the media department, was somewhat legendary, and so I was really intrigued by being able to study with people who had actually lived during, and been engaged in the civil rights movement and weren't just teaching from a textbook, but were teaching from experience. Plus, Hunter was my mother and grandmother's alma mater, from when it was an all-women's school.

Amaka: Oh. Wow, OK.

Rachel: Yeah. So you know, I knew that it was one of the -- it was a good school, academically, in terms of CUNY's record, and it was in the city, and I was very -- I had already, from 16 years old, been spending a lot of time hanging out in the city, and felt very comfortable there, and I knew that I wanted to be with an urban, mixed group of people, and so I would up at Hunter.

Amaka: OK. What years were you at Hunter?

Rachel: I graduated high school in 1990, so I started Hunter in August of -- well, no, I'm sorry, 1994. I started Hunter August of 1994, and I was there for 8 years. (laughs) You don't have to put that if you don't want to. (laughs) I was there for eight years, from '94 to 2002.

Amaka: OK. Yeah, no, I mean... You know, you not the only one. Pretty much everybody... (laughs)

Rachel: I know that. (laughs)

Amaka: What was your major, and do you remember any, like, notable classes, or professors while you were there?

Rachel: So my major was Black and Puerto Rican Studies and Urban Development, and a minor in Education. I remember my freshman year, somehow, I slipped through the cracks, and I wound up being allowed to register for a senior-level class. Which, normally, when you get registered as a freshman, you would be blocked from senior-level classes, because there's a certain amount of exposure that they want you to have --

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: Around the college environment, and so, somehow, I don't know why or how it happened, but I would up being able to register for a senior-level class. The professor was professor [Cosmolly?]. He was from Tanzania, [00:15:00] he was Indo-African... and beautiful. I mean, all of the politically conscious women in the school just used to drool and die over this man. (laughs) He must have been in his late-forties, or early-fifties at the time, and he was just fabulous. And you know, I was like, "fuck," at the time, I said, "Jesus Christ," once we were about a month into the class itself, the rigor for this class, the reading and the writing was insane, and I actually had to pull my mother into helping me write a couple of the papers. But, in retrospect, I'm so grateful that that happened to me so early on. One, because, he was really influential and very motivational, and I think that a lot of times, in academic -- in university or college settings, some of the more controversial or, like, politically-controversial, or challenging material is not made available to freshman because they want you to be able to handle it emotionally, or socially, or whatever it is.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And I just really appreciate having slipped through the cracks and gotten into that class as a freshman, because it just amplified my desire to plug into an activist and organizing community, that was moving work around social justice in the school. Because, he didn't pull any punches, at all. So he was one of them. Professor [Marinda Ani?], who was a very controversial professor. I took a class with her called African-Centered Education, she would not allow any white people to attend her class. And I remember one of my comrades that I organized with in Hunter, in SLAM, Chris Day, Chris Gunderson, he protested it. And he attempted to register for and attend her class, and she wouldn't allow it to happen. She was really angry about it. But it was... you know, being a biracial person, it was really... [sighs] enlightening, and fascinating, to be in a class of only black people, with a black professor, who, very publicly, would not allow for the space to be transformed from the safe space that intended it to be by allowing white students to attend. And it was complicated, and there was some valuable and relevant points that Chris Gunderson or Chris Day had, in the preventing white people from staying out, and it was [womb-like?], you know? It was like, the quality and transparency of conversation that took place in that class was like nothing else I had ever experienced at Hunter. And there were some things that I disagreed with. There were conversations there about the

inherent evil of white people, you know? Which, I didn't agree with. You know, I'm born of a white mother. My mother and her entire family have never demonstrated an ounce of inherent evil, regardless of what their social status was, and so, there were things that I disagreed with, but there was -- the way that black people were able to show up to that class, the way that they were able to talk about their experiences and their desires and their dreams, without feeling any kind of ridicule, or judgement, or threat of a white presence, was really fascinating, and quite incredible. And I just finished going through BOLD, Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, which is a leadership training for black executive directors, and only black executive directors, and it felt -- the only other time that I've felt that kind of community, that kind of safety. So it was really incredible. Professor [Stewey Huing?], a white man who was a media professor at Hunter, I never took a class by him, but a number of other SLAM people did, and were really deeply influenced and well-trained around media communication and narrative development by him, and we were able to make it show up in our work in SLAM, and he was just very, very supportive of SLAM's work, and the stance that we took on campus. Isa... oh, crap, I forgot her name... I'm sorry, Isa, she's going to hate me... Anyway, I took an English literature class with a woman who looked like me, and also claimed black, because she was, even though her skin was about 7 shades lighter than what [00:20:00] many people would... you know, at first glance, regard as black.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: I'm so upset that I can't remember her last name, but we read Zora Neale Hurston, and we read Audre Lorde, and we read all of these amazing female, black authors. And I had... I mean, she had us dissect stories in a way that I had never done before, and really delve for meaning, like, really explore the depths of why a writer would put particular words on a page, and what must they be thinking about experiencing, reflecting on. You know, it changed the way that I read any kind of literature, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. And then, [Joanne] Edey-Rhodes, Professor Edey-Rhodes taught a class on the civil rights movement, and it was a two-part class, and she had lived it, you know? She had been engaged in it in the south, and then in the north, and so, she would bring guest speakers in like... who's the man that's the author of Race, Crime, and the Law? I can't remember his name, but he was a guest speaker.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: Yeah, I could send you a list of some of the guest speakers. Those, I think, were some of the most influential professors that I had when I was at Hunter. And let me know if I'm going way over and taking a lot of time.

Amaka: No, you're good. You're good. It's perfect.

Rachel: OK.

Amaka: When you arrived at Hunter, can you describe the general political climate of New York City at the time?

Rachel: It was Giuliani days, and so... it's... it was -- so, it was Giuliani era, I know that from the housing perspective, there were large fights happening around protecting rent stabilization, and beating back the rent guidelines board around increasing rents for rent-stabilized tenants. I know that housing was a big deal. 42nd Street, Times Square, was still in the process of being quote, unquote, "made over", and so there was rapid expansion happening off the homeless shelters, because the homeless were being corralled off of the streets, in order to transform 42nd Street into more of a tourist area. Very different from what it looked like when I was in high school, at the time, and coming up to 42nd Street, Times Square was a really different place. The instances of police brutality were really high, and so there was a lot of negative (inaudible) around the NYPD, that I think grew and grew in my years at Hunter, like, really got exacerbated and grew with Louima, and with Amadou Diallo, but there was already a pretty heightened [officer system?] sentiment, that, you know, I don't think was different than the, say, 70's, or 60's, or even 80's, but I was aware of it in a way that I had not been, prior to being in Hunter. There was a lot of strain around young New Yorkers of Color having access to higher education. So what I learned, early in, being at Hunter, was that the complexion of the school looked very different in the 70's and 80's than it did when I was walking into the institution then. And so, there was a lot of attention being focused on access to higher education. And then, a lot of the prison abolition work was beginning to bloom. You know, critical resistance hadn't been born yet, the work around Mumia was not as well-developed and full-fledged as it became, but a lot of the anti-prison work, and the connections between the school-to-prison pipeline stuff were getting very ripe and more mainstream.

Amaka: OK. When you walked on the Hunter's campus, what do you remember, like, the political energy being like? I mean, in terms of student clubs, student organizations, cultural events, political events, those types of things?

Rachel: I remember that... [00:25:00] There was really only one organization that had a very outward political stance on anything, and that was the Black Student Union. And that was actually the first organization that I would up recruited into. And the organization that I was engaging before SLAM, before I started to engage in SLAM. There was... the way that the political work looked was tabling, so an organization like the Black Student Union

either had a particular issue that they were organizing around, or were just doing some general issue-education. And so they would do a lot of tabling on campus. So they would set up a table, and, you know, ask students to come over and grab information. There was a lot of advocacy and education work, but there wasn't much organizing. The PIRGs, there was also a nypirg on campus. And so, the pirgs, oftentimes had stuff around, set up for voter registration. I also remember really distinctly, my first credit card I ever got was the first day of fucking school. Because the credit -- the table set up outside the campus -- school started in August. So it was still warm out. And Chase, Citibank, there was no Bank of America yet, at the time, but Chase, Citibank, a whole bunch of them, had tables set up outside to sign up young people for their first credit cards. And so, I remember the political climate just being a lot of educational information and some tabling by a handful of folks who had any kind of politicization on campus, and then there were a lot of clubs, you know, social clubs, and cultural clubs. But, who were more about parties and [big trails?] and things like that than they were about politics, per-se.

Amaka: OK. Can you speak to how SLAM came into being in the first place? I've heard things regarding the CUNY coalition, and kind of other various ways that people came in.

Rachel: Student power movement.

Amaka: Right. So could you speak to just the ways in which that emerged?

Rachel: So... So I was the president, I think, of the Black Student Union at the time, and there was the University of New York had put out communication that there was to be a tuition hike. And there were a number of people on campus who came from either similar backgrounds to mine, or had been at Hunter for a little while already, and had, you know, built some relationships with faculty or gone through some politicization, and there was the creation of a group called the Student Power Movement, which is really the precursor to SLAM. People like Kamau Franklin, [Sahara Hammad?], myself, [Andra Battles?], [Sonda Lavados?], [Ed Grant?], Chris Gunderson, these were all folks who were engaged in the Student Power Movement, and that was the formation at Hunter. There were several other formations that had been pulled together at other CUNY schools throughout the system, and that's what sparked the creation of the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts. So there was both the, I think, proposal of a tuition hike, as well as the cuts to particular departments within the CUNY infrastructure. So there was going to be some cuts made to, I think the Black and Puerto Rican Studies Departments, the library, I'm sure the tament library had some of those documents.

Amaka: Yeah. I have some of those.

Rachel: Around what the specific cuts were, but... so, there was a coalition that got pulled together that met weekly, I think it was weekly, or every two weeks, and began to craft [messages?] against the cuts to the City University, and against the tuition hike, and started to pull together the infrastructure for a walk-out, and a massive protest at City Hall. And... I mean, I think... [00:30:00] If memory serves me right, it was maybe 4 to 5 months, you know, the planning work that went behind it was about 3, 4, maybe 5 months, and we pulled together [allowance?], the call that brought 20,000, I mean, upwards of -- those were the police numbers.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: The police put out that 20,000 people showed up at City Hall for this protest. I've never, in all of my organizing work between now and then, ever been involved in pulling together a group of people that size, since then, ever. And it was wildly successful. The high school students did a walkout, almost every single -- all of the city universities had people walk out. Some of the CUNY institutions had people walk out. Labor was there. It was my first taste of the different [pointments?] that would come later in the future around trying to strategize with labor. It had been a difficult road. So the Coalition Against the Cuts was not just students.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: There were a number of labor unions who were involved, also.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: And so, this fantastic turnout for the rally happened, and then I was not a part of the brilliant idea, or the brilliant conversation that landed on taking over the student government at Hunter, as a means of generating resources for organizing. I believe that that came from [Jet Brant?], possibly Sahara Hammad and [Kim Ways?], maybe even Sonda Lavados, there was the CUNY -- the Hunter arm of the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts, which was the Student Power Movement, had some discussion about how to garner deeper resources to really fuel our organizing work around the CUNY issue and some broader issues, and so the idea came to run for student government, and so that's how SLAM came to be. SLAM became the name of the place that we ran for student government that first year.

Amaka: OK. So SLAM's development in terms of, you know, when it was given a name and all of that, was explicitly in relationship to running for student government?

Rachel: Yes.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: That's my under -- yes.

Amaka: OK. So how would you describe the structure of SLAM? I mean, you have a slate that's an office, you also have, I guess, a sort-of membership. I mean, is it like a mass membership, is it mainly student government? How would you just describe the structure?

Rachel: [With this question, manage?] to keep the balance on. So (laughs) it was. So in order to... So in running for student government, you have to have a slate that includes a president, a vice-president, a treasurer, and there were a number of elected officers. And so, the infrastructure of SLAM was so the officers who were elected to their position via the student body, they made up the formal slate, which included an executive board. And there were staff, employees, that we could potentially create at will. You know, you could have a very [lean?] staff that was someone who ran your finances, and an office manager, or a much more robust staff, which is what we had. We had project coordinators, we developed political projects. We had leadership development, a leadership development person who really cultivated relationships with the student clubs, and with leadership development. We had a finance manager who maintained the finances of the organization. So there was this elected board, and, you know, at times, it got a little bit difficult, because not everyone who was involved in the political work was eligible to run for political offices. So you had to maintain a certain GPA, and be taking a certain amount of credits each semester in order to qualify to run for the slate. And so, at times, that discounted people who might have been taking one or two classes at the college, and were very involved in the political work, but couldn't run for office. And so, sometimes, we wound up having to fill seats with people who were not necessarily in [lock step?] with our politics. And so, it -- I mean, it was a challenge and a risk, but also an opportunity to politicize people who felt that serving on student government, [00:35:00] whether it was an important responsibility and an important role, we really were able to push them to see that role beyond just student clubs, and, you know, enriching student life through recreational activities and things like that. And then there was -- there were supporters who sort of satellite the organization, who did not have formal decision-making powers, but who were very influential and brought into conversations around decisions that the student government was going to make, and the direction that was going to proceed.

Amaka: OK. And so... So in terms of the different kind of work and activities that folks did, I mean, I know that it was supremely important that you guys have, like, a physical space for people to come into, in terms of getting involved in things. Could anyone just walk in and decide that they wanted to work on a project, or was there, like, a process by which people kind of came into the organization, maybe they got trained, or, I mean, were there different kind of levels, I guess, at which people engaged in SLAM?

Rachel: So we had a study group, and there was really a commitment to the [upper?] study theory together. We had -- there was a split between work that was very much about sort of student life and college life, so we had a street fair every year where we had vendors come, and the clubs got to be tabling for the day, and really talk about what their student clubs were about. And we really worked hard to make sure that they were as politicized as possible. We invited a number of community organizations from New York to come and table as well, and then we'd put on a cultural performance. I think our street fair was one of the first times that dead prez had showcased their stuff to a student body before. But, yes, people could just walk in and get information about student clubs, about what the student government was doing, and if they wanted to volunteer to work on a particular project, they would get paired up either with the executive board member who was [moving?] that particular body of work, or one of the project coordinators that was moving that body of work. So the project coordinators, we ran a high school organizing committee.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: Where we were doing political education and development work with high school students, and if you were a student at Hunter and you wanted to volunteer on that work, you could come in and you would get paired up with the staff person who was running a particular piece of work, and you would be able to volunteer on that piece of work. We did [movement?] work, and so, if you wanted, if you were a student that was interested in getting involved in Mumia's campaign, you could come to the bi-weekly meetings around Mumia and get plugged into that organizing work. We did some prison abolition work. And so, yeah, the structure was pretty loose. I mean, I think about it now, like, we used to talk about and study cointelpro, with regards to Mumia's case, and we were just sort of an open thing, like, you could infiltrate us fairly easily.

Amaka: OK. And I guess, along with that, I mean, there seemed to be like a lot of different political standpoints and ideologies within SLAM, whether it was anarchism, Marxism, Maoist, whatever.

Rachel: Right.

Amaka: I mean, do you think there was a unified political ideology, or was it the fact that there was so many different kind of positions that made it what it was?

Rachel: I mean, I think that it was both ends. I think the richness of SLAM comes from the fact that there were some diverse political ideologies, like when you really dig down to the granular level, and examine the difference between anarchism, Marxism, feminism, or Maoism, there are some fairly stark differences, but this was a space where people were able to put those differences out of site, but absolutely debate them through study and struggle together, and they fit in into the political work that we were doing, in part because we were organizing or looking to organize a college student population that was far more center. They were really more centered than any of us were. I mean, it didn't matter what we were, anarchists, Marxist, feminist, we were far more left than the student population was, and so it required all of us to have a [00:40:00] -- to strike a balance between our politics and appealing to a more left audience, and I think we were able to really finesse that with each other. Plus, there was a lot of very deep love and personal respect for each other. I mean, some of the debates continue to this day. There are differences in political ideology among friends to this day, and it hasn't changed... except for a couple of instances, it hasn't really changed the nature of our relationship with each other, and we were able to land on some very broad goals around what we wanted to achieve with the students that we were organizing, that were not affected by those differences in ideology.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: From my perspective, anyway.

Amaka: OK. I guess, along with the kind of diversity of political stance and ideology, I mean, it was a racially and ethnically diverse organization, as well. Did that, I mean... You know, it must have led to tension in some way. I guess I was wondering, like, what tensions did it lead to, and how did you guys kind of resolve or like move through those tensions?

Rachel: So the white men, is still the norm. Were idea droppers. They would come and [inaudible] ideas, and then the women of color were expected to be the architects, and the people who built out the methodology for how that got carried out, and that was a fairly serious point of contention regularly. What was interesting was, I think, at one of the highest points for a number of years, who had some very intense political leadership coming from a white anarchist man and a black anarchist woman, Kai Lumumba Barrow and Chris Gunderson, who were elders of the organization, both of them in their forties at the time, and who had differing perspectives, but a lot of respect for each other. A lot of political similarities, and so it created a space to really negotiate where people were, politically, and actually achieve a little bit of balance. There was, I think, you know... I think because of the community that we were organizing, and where we were organizing, the context of what we were organizing in, we... the people who were decidedly anarchists knew that a lot of the anarchist tendencies were not going to be things that played well with the community. And so, when we had to land on particular tactics or organizing approaches, there were never long, drawn-out debates around what the tactical approach was going to be, because the university community was not going to respond to smashing the university windows, you know?

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: In the same way that another community might. Were we able to do some lockdowns? Sure. You know, we were able to do some really solid, direct actions, that were... I guess some people might see them as anarchist in nature, really, they were some civil disobediences. But, you know, I think... I think some of the... Because there were students organizing some of the political tensions that could have existed and really run rampant... For most of us, that wasn't where our organizing was going to end, you know?

Amaka: OK, OK.

Rachel: It wasn't a destination. It was a rite of passage, almost, it was sort of a pass-through. You know, many of us were college students. Some of us adult college students, returning college students, but no one was going to stay and organize in the university for forever, and there was, I think, a basic set of principles that SLAM held, regardless of your political leanings. People were able to consent around a basic set of principles, and, you know, the call was for every (inaudible) or new entering classes, SLAM [needed?] to take that on, and really be aligned with the basic principles.

Amaka: OK, OK. So open admissions, and you know, the end of open admissions, I mean, was certainly a defining aspect of SLAM. Can you speak to the ways in which you remember, like, the attack on open admissions, as well as the response? [00:45:00] Like, SLAM's response, the campus's response.

Rachel: I mean, in retrospect, I know now that we would have never had an adequate response to open admissions. We wouldn't, we did not have the power to be able to leverage enough fight and enough people to be able to move the university to change the path that it was going down.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: I think, what that required was the kind of organizing effort that happened through the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts. So SLAM alone, in and of itself, was never going to be able to leverage that kind of power. I remember our narrative around the end of open admissions being that up until 1976, the CUNY had an open

admissions policy, where if you were a young resident of the city, from a working-class background, or working-class community, you were offered the opportunity to go to the city university for free, and that it wasn't until 1976 when they began to take students of color, and that started to shift. And so, what was helpful was, we were really able to make the argument around race, and organize a lot of young people of color. But, again, in a college setting, where people are trying to figure out what they're going to major in in life, you know, wanting to be an accountant versus wanting to be a designer, like, you're still dealing with groups of people who, whether they come from a poor family, a working-class family, or a middle-class family, are trying to chart a course for what is going to be their bread and butter for the rest of their life.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And so, it was a good place to do entry level politicizing of young people, but we explored things like a tuition boycott... it would have been a herculean effort to really move something at the scale required to make an impact.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: To, you know, to really, really organize that. So yeah, I think it was difficult, and it's part of why the CUNY work was not SLAM's only focus.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: Because, we knew that there was more that people were experiencing when they needed help with their communities, and that that was, in many ways, the place to be able to pull people in. You know, around police harassment, around the prison industrial complex. For a lot of young black people in New York, to be able to go to college was like their parents' and grandparents' dream of all dreams. They weren't going to fuck that up.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: You know?

Amaka: That's real, yeah. Can you speak to the culture of SLAM? So I mean, of course you guys were doing all this political work, but, you know, everybody's talked about how fun it was, and...

Rachel: It was.

Amaka: All the kind of cultural activities that you guys were doing. A lot of y'all were dating each other. Folks were coming into themselves.

Rachel: Not me! (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) But, you know what I'm saying.

Rachel: I didn't date nobody in SLAM! Not one of them. (laughs) So I said, we had the annual street fair, which was amazing. You know, we brought a lot of performers. We had a number of benefit concerts from Mumia, we had four of them. One was... oh, man, I can't remember the name of it. Something for little ones and Mumia, was a benefit concert for the Child Care Center at (inaudible), and also for Mumia, and then we had a second one that was about Momea, which was -- I mean, one of the most amazing -- I was the person who pulled this together, and I would up having to host it because we got commitment from Black Thought from The Roots to come and host, and he showed up about an hour late and high.

Amaka: Oh, lord.

Rachel: And so, before, he wasn't there, and I was panicking about our host not having arrived, (inaudible) was like, "Rachel, you pulled this shit together. You know it inside and out. You have to be the hostess for this. You have to do this." And I was in tears, and, you know, preferred the back.

Amaka: Yeah.

Rachel: And you know, the backseat, but would up having to (inaudible) and it was the most [satisfying?] experience of my life. Mos Def was there, Dead Prez was there, [TK Mark Ronson?], The Roots performed, like, it was really fantastic. So it was wonderful because we had -- we were a real sexy, you know, good-looking group of young people, and so, that helps, in organizing the other young people into the work. [00:50:00]

Amaka: Word.

Rachel: We had a culture of direct action, so no one was afraid of [making a left?] out there in the street. And so, there was a lot of good, solid direct-action work that we did. Always with song, and chants, and dances, and so, when we -- when SLAM would show up to a rally or some kind of direct action, they would always want us to be in the front, or somewhere that was a little showcased, because we had a particular song that was designed, and a dance to go with it, and people would really get down with the vibe. We always brought music with us wherever we went. We held a lot of small fundraisers for some of the external organizations, and smaller clubs, and this place called Thomas Hunter Hall pretty regularly, that had drinks and whatever. We did auctions, like, human auctions of men and women, where you could buy a hottie out to go on a date, you know, offer up money to go on a date with somebody who was a hottie in the school, in order to raise money for some of the work that we did. There's the cultural, you know, Kai, this unbelievable artist, so he would have events where there would be a lecture or a panel

discussion, and then, in the background, Kai would be painting this incredible mural based on how she was inspired by people's words. It was probably the best and most vibrant organizing time that I've had, where there's been (inaudible) and cultural were really deeply infused with each other. It was a lot of fun.

Amaka: Can you speak more to, like, the importance of mentors in SLAM? So everybody has mentioned Kai, every single person talks about Kai at length. But even, Ashanti Austin and, like, some other folk, can you just speak to the importance of mentors in your experience at SLAM?

Rachel: So what was great, I think because of the depths of politics that a lot of the original SLAM people had, we crafted some veterans, like Kai and Ashanti Austin, [Sally O'Brien?] who runs, where we live, and is in the [EPAI?]. So we've had a lot of elders who had been involved in fighting for many, many years, and come from diverse communities and diverse experiences, and it was wonderful not to recreate the wheel all the time, or have to run into a particular pitfall or disaster in order to learn a lesson, that we had people there who could actually bring their practical [effort?] to the table.

Amaka: Right. OK.

Rachel: There's also... I mean, it was helpful in [some ways?] for finding our own personal politics. You know, so, our mentors really participated in study with us. They participated in [fixture?] planning with us. And so, I still credit SLAM as being one of the most foundational places where I learned my skills in developing agendas, facilitating conversations and meetings, moving strategic planning process teams, really using [meaning?] the dialectics between my [craftings?] and my theories, and a lot of that came from the older mentors. And then, as people got older, and were starting to graduate, there would be a mentorship, not just of the people who were our elders in age, but people who were the originators, sort of the founders of SLAM, really mentoring and bringing through the ropes, the younger people who were coming in and running on the slate. Because, after a while, we reached a point where some of us could no longer run for office, and could no longer hold student government office. And so, there was a lot of work to do to mentor and cultivate the politics of younger people who were very attracted to -- a lot of people were very attracted to the cultural element of SLAM. The parties, and the dances, and the informal round table discussions, and some of the direct action, and really, we wanted to be able to have that couched in a deeper politic, and a deeper learning, and so there was a lot of mentorship that happened as each year of SLAM people turned over into being from the freshman to a sophomore to a junior to a senior, there was sort of an informal taking under the wing of new folks who were coming into the organization.

Amaka: OK. I mean, how was leadership developed in SLAM? I mean, we had people coming from such various, different backgrounds, [00:55:00] some folks who were older students. I mean, how was leadership developed in SLAM?

Rachel: Well I think in retrospect, a critique that I would have was that it was not an intentional process. And that it really happened through relationship development. And so, there were a lot of very deep, trusting relationships that got built amongst particular people, and then the leadership development happened through those relationships, and happened through that mentoring, and it wasn't like we had a very deliberate leadership development, on-going leadership development program. People did a lot of learning through either their service in the office of student government, or in our study groups, or, you know, we spent a lot of social time together. I mean, this was, truly, we were each other's family for years and years. We went out to eat together, we went to each other's homes, we were there for when people got pregnant and started having babies, and so there was a lot of -- we met each other's families, parents and siblings, so there was a lot of the leadership development that just happened by virtue of relationships, not because we put a deeply-intentional program in place.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: Unfortunately, because I think, had we done so, SLAM would not have only been around for 10 years. You know, I think it would have... at Hunter, anyway. I think it would have been able to go beyond the 10-year stint that it did.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: And then, you know, the truth is that after particular people within SLAM left the organization, there was less and less of that relationship-cultivating. The thread that was rooted in a particular politic, in a particular vision, got lost. And so, I think the last couple of years that SLAM was around, there was both, to some degree, a watering down of the politic, and also an opening of raw and, sort of, like, the Achilles heel, in a number of ways, that allowed the administration at Hunter to be able to take advantage of moving SLAM out of the college.

Amaka: OK, so you think that's, in large part, due to the, you know, if you guys could have been more intentional about leadership development, in terms of, you know, the tenure of the organization being longer, and I guess, making it more vulnerable to attack from the administration?

Rachel: I wouldn't say in large part, but I think that was definitely -- it definitely had a -- it definitely was a factor at play.

Amaka: OK. Can you speak to SLAM's relationships to -- so, Hunter SLAM's relationships to other CUNY campuses? There were, you know, I guess other SLAM chapters in other spaces, though they weren't necessarily as strong or, you know, entrenched in terms of being in student government, as it was in Hunter, that there were other chapters, I guess, at various different times. What was that relationship, and what -- I mean, how did you see the Hunter SLAM being different from those other chapters?

Rachel: We had other SLAM chapters. There was only... well, there was a SLAM chapter at City College, that Hank Williams really ran, and I think that was probably the best relationship that we had. City College and Hostos. So Hostos had a number of (inaudible) with access around racism and immigration issues, and so there was a lot of alignment with the politics of the students there at Hostos, and us at SLAM. I think City College was the second place where there was a lot of alignment around what the SLAM chapter there was doing. We had sort of a loose policy around chapter, around replication and starting (inaudible) chapters. I'm trying to remember... god, I can't believe how long ago it was. I know I must have some stuff in my Hotmail account that outlines - and I will look for you - what the protocol was for establishing a SLAM chapter.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: We had good relationships with City College. Hunter and City always did a lot of things together, I think there was a lot of very deep alignment. With Baruch, lesser, to a lesser extent, because the makeup of the students at Baruch -- so, Baruch specialized in business degrees.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And so, [01:00:00] already, there was a distinction between Hunter being more of a liberal arts university, and Baruch being a very business-minded institution, that meant that even the students there who had more of a liberal political orientation were not left in their political thinking, and were still there to get MBAs, you know, in marketing and finance and so, some of the broader world views that we held around U.S. Imperialism and the role of Wall Street and corporations were not necessarily shared by some of the students who tried to do political organizing at Baruch. And CSI, College of Staten Island, is another place where we had some relationships, [JT. Katafio?], who I actually was a colleague of when I was at the transport workers union at local 100, because he became a bus operator. He was a trotskyite at City College, and so the City College formation, because of who some of them were, tended to take more of an ultra-left stance.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: And they were not well-embraced by their student body, and we often had a lot of debate around approach and sort of, like, appealing to the masses, and development of popular education tools, and so there was some contention there from time-to-time. Then we built, even outside of New York, there was a lot of relationship building happening with STORM, which was a political formation, not a student-based, but a political formation happening in the bay area. And so, we actually did a trip out to the bay area when the first Critical Resistance Conference happened in the bay area, I think there was about 12 of us who went, specifically to be able to sit down and meet with the STORM people, and Van Jones was a founder of STORM, and still there at that time, [Harmony Goldberg?] and Van were codirectors of storm. There were a lot of relationships built there that continue to this day, and so, there was a lot of learning and exchange that happened, even outside of New York, and outside of the CUNY campuses with some other young people who were forming political organizations.

Amaka: OK. Yeah, I'm going to be interviewing some STORM-connected folks when I'm talking about the attack on affirmative action, the UC system.

Rachel: OK, great.

Amaka: Yeah, so, I will be talking to some of those people. So can you speak a little bit -- I mean, in terms of SLAM being a student organization, it was deeply entrenched in, you know, communities of color in New York, more-so than probably any other student organization I've ever seen. Can you speak to those relationships, and even in, you know, a lot of these organizations that you guys were connected to, ended up really establishing themselves as non-profits and still kind of exist today? So can you just speak to those relationships, and the importance of those connections and those relationships?

Rachel: Sure. So Malcolm X Grassroots Movement was a really vital relationship that we had and held for a really long time. Most of us still have relationships with Lumumba and Monifa, who are more loosely connected to the organization now, because they do other things, Lamumba is with the [NAA 15?], Monifa is, I'm trying to remember where Monifa is...

Amaka: It's like, Moms Uprising or something. I forget -- I know Lamumba and Monifa well, so, yeah.

Rachel: Yeah. So MXGM was a relationship that we had even in the Student Power Movement days. So Kamau Franklin was a part of Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Lamumba and Monifa, Asha Bendele were all deeply engaged in that work, and Asha and Lamumba were students at Hunter. And so, that's where some of those early relationships got solidified. And so, we did a lot of support work around Black August, so, when Black August

began. You know, really took a lot of leadership from the young black people who were moving some of that organizing work, because there were a nice handful of (inaudible) who came from fairly comfortable working-class families, like, we really recognized our privilege in being able to be college-educated, and having had parents who were either college-educated or had something of a stable upbringing, and so the relationships that we built that were based in the communities that the students went home to were really key. So [Evan Sham?] was one, [Taz?], which was not yet CAAAV organizing for Asian communities, but just known as CAAAV, and the acronym broke down to something, but I can't remember what it was. [01:05:00] Quite an interesting relationship with CAAAV at that time, it was... there was some deep political critiques that we each had of each other, which lead to some mistrust, especially around the police brutality organizing work around Amadou Diallo and Abner Louima... you know, it's... [sigh] how do I describe it delicately? We were very principled, and very committed to political struggle, and very committed to seeing and honoring the difference in each other, but respectfully pushing back, you know, and pushing particular political lines. And in some spaces, that was really, really well-received, and respected, and in others, it wasn't. And I think, from organizations that were rooted in communities of color, and had a lot of leadership by communities -- by people of color, they were wary of the roles that Jet and Chris Day played in the organization. I mean, even to the point of, Jet was accused of being an FBI agent at one point, you know, which, at that time, carried a lot of -- I mean, that was a serious accusation to make.

Amaka: Right. Right, right.

Rachel: And essentially could have prevented him from being able to organize in lots of different circles throughout the city. So some of the relationships were strained, and a little tenuous. But, I think, with PNP, MXGM, there were really, really good solid, external relationships. The... Mumia, oh, Christ, who was the vice-president, the vice-chair of this fucking thing...? The Mumia Solidarity Network, like, the New York Mumia Coalition, we had very deep relationships with the Mumia Coalition, with Pam and Ramona Africa in Philadelphia, and with a number of Mumia organizations from around the country. Critical resistance, when it began, when it first started, Kai was moving a lot of work there, separate from [them?], and so, we built a lot of good relationships there, and National Movement Against Sweatshops, which took a lot of leadership from the Chinese community in downtown Brooklyn, and in downtown Manhattan. No, downtown Manhattan. Not Brooklyn at all, downtown Manhattan. Over by the Brooklyn Bridge on Canal Street, they had their headquarters, and so we had a pretty good, deep relationship with (inaudible). Who else did we work with...? DRUM, Desis Rising Up and Moving.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: A south Asian organization from Queens. Who else...? Oh, no...

Amaka: Well, no, I mean, that's cool, if any come to mind, you can always email me, you don't have to think of all of them right now. (laughs)

Rachel: Yeah. I will. But, you know... we were very deliberate about crafting relationships with organizations that were rooted in local communities, because we knew that organizing on a student campus wasn't enough, and that we really had to make connections back with the movements and political work that was happening back in the communities that the students actually went home to.

Amaka: Right. Some people, and, you know, not everybody's talked about this, but some people spoke about the Republican National Convention, like, the response to that in different ways. Some people kind of, you know, described it as really demoralizing, some people -- I mean, people described it in different ways. How do you remember, I guess, that? How do you remember experiencing that, and do you think at all if the...? I guess, response to the Republican National Convention, do you feel as if it might have... [sighs] I don't know, maybe lead to different feelings about SLAM, changing feelings about SLAM from folks that were involved? I don't know. Just wondering about your experience there.

Rachel: It's an interesting question, I mean, I would be fascinated to know if there were people who, from that experience, decided that they couldn't engage anymore, because I've never heard that or been faced with that, like, transparent conversation. I think many of the people who felt demoralized, I would guess, [01:10:00] were involved in the puppet space, and creating the media and visual materials that were being prepared for the actual rally itself. So the way that -- and I think that maybe some of them felt demoralized because of the white leadership, that really moved most of the organizing work in Philadelphia. And I assume we're talking about Philadelphia and not New York.

Amaka: Yes. Yes, Philadelphia.

Rachel: Yeah. I think there was a lot of white leadership that were calling the shots in Philadelphia, and there had to be separate caucuses, and separate work groups pulled together for people of color. There was a people of color working group, and so, I think a lot of what might have had people feel demoralized was the fact that folks of color had to set up their own space in order to have good conversation, and really decide what their contribution to the whole thing was going to be, and even with their own space, we didn't really have decision-making power around

how it was going to come together. And so, I think that was hard and really frustrating. Also, for SLAM, we rolled down very heavy, very deep, and divided ourselves, as an organization, into two camps. One camp was doing visual and messaging media materials, and working in a space called the puppet space, which was this huge warehouse where they were building sleeping dragons, you know, these big cement cans, these cans with cement poured in them, and with little hooks built into them, where people could put chains around their hand and just reach inside it, attach the chain to a hook on the inside, and we were going to do a number of street blockades. They were making puppets, and banners, and all kinds of really incredible, beautiful art. And the puppet space wound up being seized.

Amaka: Oh, OK.

Rachel: Apparently there was an undercover cop who had been working on pulling together the puppets for days, I mean, even a week. And I think it was a really incredible learning opportunity in that even with all the work that we had done, and the experience that we had had at SLAM, together, we still regarded the direct-action work, so, more of the stealth sort of -- so, the other camp of us, which I was a part of, was the direct-action crew. And we had a number of points throughout the city that we were going to just sort of wreak havoc. Block off streets, you know, block off highway entrances, just sort of make a big melee, so that the city was not able to function normally. And a number of us - I think all of us, really regarded that work as still being the important and very sexy work, you know? And even more than sexy, important. Like, the tactical direct-action work was what was seen as very important.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And I think the learning... I know, for me, and I think for a number of people, because I've had some good conversations, was that the rest of [the month?] was clear, like, the Republicans and the police were clear. What was important was the messaging. What was important were the visuals. What was important was what the media was going to be able to capture in one particular place. And so, the reason why they targeted and shut down the puppet space, was because that was where all of our messaging was coming from.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And so, there was almost a blackout. When the convention happened, there was a crew of us that had not been arrested -- so, they arrested everyone in the puppet space. Sandra Barros, we had a whole handful of people who spent a few days in jail, and the direct-action component went off on the day that was planned, but it barely registered as a blip in the media, because, you know, we ran around, locking down highways, moving dumpsters into the street, pushing over trashcans, newspaper disseminators into the street, and really, like, blocking up traffic. But, there were no cameras there to capture it, and there was no messaging there to say why we were doing what we were doing.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: And so, it looked like a bunch of ragtag anarchists running around, angry. And so, I think that that's part of what lead to [a trillion?] demoralizing, which was so much work went into pulling it together, and at the end of the day, we... [01:15:00] You know, it didn't come off to the rest of the world. The media covered almost none of it, and none of our messaging around why republican -- why the Christian right or the right-wing politic in this country was so damaging to our communities, none of that came off. So in the moment, you know, from my experience, it was exhilarating, and it was wonderful. We were -- I mean, we shut down a lot of shit in a lot of places in Philadelphia; they had major traffic congestion for a long time. They had to run around with chain cutters all over the place. We had some really exciting and dynamic standoffs with the police. But none of it mattered, at the end of the day. Whether or not that became the catalyst for some people to move away from SLAM, I'm unaware. I really don't know. I feel like I've never been privy to anybody sharing that information with me.

Amaka: OK. In terms of, you know, the decline, and I guess the eventual end of SLAM, like, I've heard from various people kind of various different factors, including the fact that some folks were graduation, and needing to move on, folks were burnt out after many years being involved in SLAM, the changing demographics of Hunter after the end of open admissions and the fact that students were less receptive to SLAM being in office, as well as just, you know, the administration was very, you know, targeted and intentional about getting SLAM out. What -- do you -- I mean... what are some of the factors that you see involved in the end of SLAM?

Rachel: I think those are all right. I think it was almost a... I don't know that I would call it a perfect storm, because it was a number of years that it took for it to peter out, but I think that those are all correct. I don't know that I would have anything to add to that list.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: Except that maybe, we never cemented an exit strategy. We never locked in or discussed a transition plan out of the university, and into a different kind of formation. That might have had a relationship to, or orientation to, SLAM on campus. I think had there been that kind of planning, had we deliberately created a space that was where people who were graduating or being burnt out, or, you know, moving on, could go to, that we might have been able to see the movement of SLAM exiting from the campus out into the world, and potentially still holding onto the

campus component of it, because there would have been some reciprocity there, there would have been a relationship and a way to allow long-time folks like myself to recharge their batteries and be able to hold it in for another (inaudible), while at the same time, providing very targeted support and guidance and infrastructure for the people who were still there on campus.

Amaka: OK. I mean, I guess, after SLAM, from, you know, all of your various experiences in SLAM, like, what do you take from that time, being involved in SLAM, whether it's particular events, particular experiences, what do you think that you've taken from that time, or learned from that time, that you've been able to apply in work that you've done since slam?

Rachel: So much. So much. So I think it was... Before right to the city, it was the only place where my politics could be very clearly articulated, debated, and developed. None of my other work afterwards, work that was a combination of my bread-and-butter work and sort of pseudo-political work, like, Jobs with Justice, the Transport Workers' Union, Actors Equity Association, none of those places were ever a hub where I could engage in real political debate, I could really refine my understanding, an understanding of the world, and sharpen my worldview, and really begin to dialectic, really have my politics be able to inform my practice in a way that showed up in the work. I mean, I mentioned before, there are so many very practical skills that were first developed and honed at SLAM. So strategic planning, meeting facilitation, my finance skills. I can keep books, because I was the finance manager for two years, and I used to take my ledgers by hand. Now, there's all kinds of software that you can use to do it, but I used to keep my ledgers by hand. So my skill in finance work. [01:20:00] A lot of the relationships that I've built are still ongoing, most of them. I don't think there's a single person that I don't still have some kind of connection to, whether it's via Facebook, or through kids, or whatever it is. Amaka, can you hang on one second?

Amaka: Yeah, sure.

Rachel: I have a hoverer. (laughs) [muffled speaking to someone else] So I think, you know, very basic organizing skills, how to craft a message, how to assess an audience, how to do one-on-one organizing, were all skills that I learned from SLAM. Authentic relationship-building, so, you know, like I said, the relationships that I had, I really consider the SLAM family my family. I would do anything for, I think, 99% of the people that were engaged in that work.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: You know, if they called on me and needed something, I would be able to be present, and I think that I learned how to be a really good and loving friend, comrade and ally, while also being honest about how I received or experienced particular people, and where I had disagreements, you know, with wither their politics or how they showed up in the world. So many things, I credit to that experience.

Amaka: What was, and I mean, this is really the last thing, but what... you know, a lot of people, you know, are part of organizations in college, you know, active in various different campaigns and activities, but after they graduate, they don't necessarily stay connected to that type of work. What do you think it was about SLAM, I mean, it seems to me that a lot of folks that were in SLAM are still very, like, committed in social justice work, and I mean, what do you think it is about SLAM in which it produced that, in a way?

Rachel: I mean, the founders were leftists. We were socialists. We had a very decided and deliberate politic from the beginning. And so, we didn't conceive of or build SLAM to be an organization to quote, unquote, "help people".

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: It was never about being do-gooders, you know? It was about transforming the world. And taking an opportunity to garner resources and apply an audience to hone our skills in doing that, and being able to mold hearts and minds over to our worldview. So I feel like there were always longer-term dreams and implications about the work that we were doing. We happened to be doing our political work in a campus environment, and think that, you know, we could do some good stuff while we were there. But, none of the people who founded SLAM, and, for a large chunk of people who came through its ranks, they were already down that path towards being long-term social justice organizers and movement builders, and people who sought to change the world. It wasn't about charity, it wasn't about help, you know? We were helping ourselves. It was about... there was so much of our own experiences, and our own lives that helped to move why we were doing what we were doing, that it was -- none of us were like, "oh, I grew up in, you know, a cushy four-bedroom home in Long Island, and I've never experienced any kind of trauma or persecution, and so, because I'm so fortunate, I just want to help people." That was never the motivation.

Amaka: Right, right. (laughs)

Rachel: And so, I think that's... I mean, people started SLAM because they were committed to revolution, to radical revolutionary change in the world, and so, I think for the majority of us, we are still trying to move that work in different vehicles.

Amaka: Word. OK, is there anything else that you haven't said, or that you'd like to highlight, about, I guess, anything that you've [laughed] already spoken to, or haven't spoken to?

Rachel: I mean, I would just say that I mean, I'm so immensely proud of having been able to be a part of that. I credit that exp-- those eight years, and beyond, I credit my experience with that crew of people [01:25:00] with so much of who and how I am in the world. I just think that, you know, it was a really incredible crew of folks. We talked for a long time about getting things kicked off again and getting it restarted, and I don't -- at this point, it could never be SLAM, because we're not students, I mean, we're students of life, but... (laughs) I would love to see a way for that group to engage with each other again. It may not be through one common organization, but something that moves beyond Facebook and the occasional "hey, how do you do?" I would love to see the ability to have a space to reconvene. You know, with some kind of consistency, even if that was like, every few months.

Amaka: Right.

Rachel: I definitely long for that kind of community, and, you know, it's to the point where I've worked very hard everywhere that I've been to create that community, and those kinds of relationships, wherever I've moved my political work, whether it was the same quality as SLAM's or not.

Amaka: Right. Do you remember anything, I remember Suzy Subways saying something about SLAM A, and SLAM B? Like, I guess...?

Rachel: Oh, my god.

Amaka: Yeah. So like, in terms of --

Rachel: Bizarro SLAM?

Amaka: Huh?

Rachel: Did she call it Bizarro SLAM?

Amaka: No, she didn't call it that, but... (laughs) She said something about it, and I think when I was in Tamiment, I found something that said something about a SLAM A and SLAM B, it wasn't completely clear, but, me and Suzy talked about it a little bit, but, I mean, do you remember, like, what...?

Rachel: Well, what's her memory of it?

Amaka: Well, I think she remembered it in some ways as, I guess, at least the conversation, or some sort of efforts in having some sort of transition plan, so like, for the folks that were leaving, you know, how to keep the folks that were graduating and leaving in the loop, basically, but allow them to still do work that was not connected to the campus.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, it was... I think it became more apparent that that discussion needed to happen as there were people who were coming into SLAM who came, who were less rooted in real theory, political theory, and grounding. So yes, there were initial conversations about how to keep the different generations of SLAM who were phasing out engaged in the work that was happening. But, it was never wholly picked up deliberately enough to really come to fruition. And I think, you know, people's life circumstances also made it hard and complicated. Like, you know, people had to move on to take care of families, or they were moving out of the state, or... yeah, there were whole hosts of other things, but there was the SLAM A and SLAM B conversation. I mean, I can say now, being an executive director of an organization, and understanding the kind of intentionality that would have been required to build out a program like that, we didn't have it. It wasn't there.

Amaka: OK. All right, well that's, I mean, that's pretty much it. (laughs)

Rachel: Good! (laughs)

Amaka: Thank you so much. Thank you for, you know...

Rachel: You're absolutely welcome, I hope that it's helpful.

Amaka: It's very helpful. I'm happy that I was able to finally get to talk to you, but yes, it's been very helpful.

Rachel: Good. And I'm really glad. And I'm glad, it sounds like the other conversations have been really helpful, also.

Amaka: Yeah, no, I mean, I've had a -- I think, between... because, really, what I did was, I kind of really went through the archive before I started talking to people, so that I at least was able to construct a kind of timeline, and kind of course of events, and then, talking to other people, I was able to, you know, fill that in in some ways, and ask questions that really came from going through the archive, and, you know, there's clearly some things that, you know, everybody shares the same understanding around, and, that's been great, but it's also been good to just get different people's perspectives, you know, on different events and relationships, and you know, etcetera. So it's been good.

Rachel: Good. OK, good.

Amaka: All right, well...

Rachel: Alrighty, babe. Well, if there's anything else that you need, let me know if there's anything else that I think of that I think is very poignant or would be helpful, I will definitely shoot you an email.

Amaka: Thank you so much.

Rachel: Yeah, yeah. If there's anybody that you're still having a hard time getting in touch with, let me know, and I will work to pair you guys up.

Amaka: Are you still -- I mean, I've been -- I haven't heard from Sandra Barros at all, really.

Rachel: Really?

Amaka: Yeah, and I...

Rachel: Oh, I'll email her.

Amaka: OK. OK.

Rachel: She's not really on Facebook. I'll email her.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: Because Sandra's a really important one to talk to.

Amaka: Yeah, I mean, she's come up in a bunch of folk's convos, and I've even had conversations --

Rachel: Yeah. She's the founder.

Amaka: I've even had conversations with folks that were like, you know, not SLAM members, but kind of just on the outskirts and kind of, and you know, a lot of those people have spoke to the importance of Sandra, so.

Rachel: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah, I do need to talk to her. (laughs)

Rachel: Yes, you do. She's very -- I mean, you know... it's difficult (inaudible) with the organization, she's the numb -- [audio cut]

Amaka: Hello?

Rachel: ... even as she was developing politically, like, just really built, especially for a lot of the women, like [Sasa], [Luz], you know, Lenina, she was really a pillar for a lot of the women, and wouldn't call herself that, like, you know? She will not -- that will not be her memory of the roll that she played, but she was instrumental in a number of ways. And was someone who grew up steeped in a political household, and so, came to a lot of theory on her own. And so, she was a very influential, instrumental, key person in the organization. So I'll email her.

Amaka: OK.

Rachel: And send her a text, and push her to get in touch with you.

Amaka: OK, thank you. I appreciate it. (laughs)

Rachel: Yeah. Absolutely.

Amaka: All right, well, I know you have an evening of activities, so I don't want to keep you --

END OF AUDIO FILE