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Interview with Christopher Gunderson

Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

New York, NY

[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: So can you state your name?

Christopher Gunderson: Sure. Christopher Gunderson.

Amaka: And your age?

Christopher: I am 49 years old.

Amaka: And how do you racially identify?

Christopher: I'm white.

Amaka: And how do you identify your gender?

Christopher: I'm male.

Amaka: And your sexual orientation?

Christopher: Bisexual.

Amaka: And your marital status?

Christopher: Married.

Amaka: And do you have children?

Christopher: Yes, two.

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

Christopher: Well, I was born in Princeton, New Jersey. But I was raised in -- in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And so -- yeah. I -- and I lived there basically from the age of three into adulthood. I just spent a year in New York but returned to Minnesota into my mid-twenties. Yeah.

Amaka: Can you describe growing up, describe the community that you grew in -- grew up in, and, you know, the schools that you went to. Just, you know, demographics and just, you know, politically, all those things.

Christopher: Sure thing. Yeah. So I grew up -- my father is a professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota. My mother was a speech pathologist at the university hospital system. She worked in pediatric neurology. So I -- I grew up in an upper middle-class white neighborhood in the city of Minneapolis. And it was -- you know, it was nice, and comfortable, and all of the things that having comfortable things are, you know. And Minneapolis has lakes and parks, and it's a very sort of amenable place to grow up. My parents were involved in the anti-war movement around Vietnam. And I took a sort of precocious interest in that as a -- as a pretty small kids. So I have political memories going back to 1968, when I was four. So. And, you know, the school I went to was virtually all -- the grade school I went to was virtually all white up through third grade. In fourth grade, the city began a process of desegregation. And in -- so there were a few black kids who came into our school. And then in -- in fifth grade, it was wholesale bussing. And so -- and -- so I went from the neighborhood school to -- I ended up going to a -- one of the ways Minneapolis dealt with desegregation was they created all of these sort of nifty options like alternative schools and put them in the schools in predominantly -- in the predominantly black neighborhoods. And Minneapolis is -- it has a large Native American population as well, But -- but the main -- it was mainly a black-white sort of question of desegregation. Now it's got a larger Latino population. But it didn't when I was

growing up. And -- so yeah. So in fifth grade I went to Bryn Mawr school -- a school called Bryn Mawr. And then the next year I went -- the program there moved to a larger school, which was Harrison. And -- and then I went to a -- a junior high for a couple years called Marshall University. And then I went to -- which was located near the University of Minnesota -- and then I went to high school, Central High School, where -- which was located sort of south-central Minneapolis. That was a predominantly black neighborhood. It was a historically predominantly black school. And sort of with desegregation, it was supposedly now 40 percent black, 60 percent white. But I don't think that was true. You know, I -- but I'm sure there were numbers being played with. But it -- it -- but it -- it had -- it had a magnet program that was sort of -- that enabled me to graduate from high school a year early. That was sort of the -- the reward. And so, yeah. So I lived through sort of the desegregation of the public schools there in -- in the '70s. And, you know, my parents were sort of left-liberals. And, you know, we grew up having sort of positive identification with the Civil Rights movement. My parents, as I said, were involved in the anti-war movement. And I was a very sort of bookish [00:05:00] kid. And I read a lot of stuff pretty early. I -- when I was like 11, 10, 11, 12, when -- basically when all this is happening, I'm reading the autobiography of Malcolm X. I'm reading Che Guevara. I'm reading -- trying to read Karl Marx. It's a little rougher. And just a lot of stuff like that. I'm reading about student protests. I very sort of identify with the student new left, which, you know, is sort of a recent memory at -- at that point. And, yeah. And -- so. That -- that's my -- that -- that was my growing up. And so I was sort of politicized at an early age, and then went through all sorts of twists and turns in terms of my political development well before I got -- got to New York and --

Amaka: So after high school, what is your path? Do you go to college? Do you take time off? Where -- what do you get involved in after high school?

Christopher: So -- yeah. So I graduated from college in -- I graduated from high school in 1981. So. And I -- I went to the University of Minnesota for a year. And at the time, there was a big fight around draft registration. They had just restored draft registration after the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. And Jimmy Carter reinitiated draft registration. And I got involved in opposition to that. And I fell in with the libertarians. The sort of Koch brothers financed student libertarians. So I got involved in that and became a member of their -- the student organization, at exactly the moment that the Koch brothers pulled their money out. And so the organization collapsed, or almost completely collapsed, except for me. I was 19 years old. And I basically said, "We can't let it collapse." And -- and I was elected the national director of this organization. The -- nobody wanted to be national director. I mean, that -- I don't want to exaggerate my -- you know, I had built a sort of -- one thing is -- I had built a high school underground newspaper in my freshman year in college instead of going to classes. I mean, I went to classes, but you know. I -- it was called Jailbreak. And so we had -- it -- it started out as this mimeograph thing. And we basically distributed it at -- in like 25 high schools. And it was a sort of -- it called itself a libertarian high school underground newspaper. But it was sort of an amalgam of sort of punk rock, youth rebellion, sort of alienated suburban white youth, kind of thing, right. Politically confused. And lots of different people participating in it at that -- and so -- but we had sort of stirred some -- we had stirred some stuff up and thought we were great. So. So I get elected national director of this thing. And I -- that's when I move -- I -- when I first moved out to New York. I -- their office was in Washington D.C., but I moved to -- I moved the office to NYU, actually. Because the libertarians had a little club space. We had no office, so -- we had no office space, so even though I wasn't a student at NYU, I spent a year in the club spaces at NYU using it as a -- basically squatting space in the -- what's the name of the -- student activities building at NYU?

Amaka: Kimmel? Or -- no.

Christopher: It may have changed.

Amaka: It's a different building now anyway.

Christopher: Yeah, sure. It -- yeah, sure it is.

Amaka: It's changed.

Christopher: It was a -- so. So in any event -- and that year in New York sort of shook up my politics. I started reading more widely. I got exposed to anarchist stuff in particular. And I -- by the end of the year, it was clear that this organization I was national director of did not really exist. And so I said, hey -- sort of acknowledged reality, folded up, went back to Minnesota. But I'd been sort of infected by, you know, seeing a larger world, and seeing some of the uglier realities of, you know -- I was living on the Lower East Side at the time. It was, like, the depths of the post-fiscal crisis. You know, there were junkies everywhere. It was just [00:10:00] -- you know. I was living in an illegal sublet in a tenement that, you know -- so I just saw a lot more intense poverty than I'd ever seen before. And I saw racism in a way that I -- I mean, I had always sort of known it existed. But it hadn't really shaped my understanding of the world. And now it's sort of much more in my face. And so -- so I went back to Minnesota with all of that. And kind of pushing the libertarians to the side and going in sort of more left-wing anarchist thing. And then I -- and I went back to school for a bit. I went to the University of Minnesota. I dropped out for a variety

of both personal, financial reasons. I was having some problems with my family. My parents divorced. And -- and -- and -- and then I went to art school.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: I spent two years at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

Amaka: What is your medium?

Christopher: I worked in -- I did -- I went in -- I wanted to go into graphic design. That was -- I -- I sort of figured I wanted a -- I wanted a trade. I wanted a practical skill. Art school doesn't seem like the obvious place to get it, but it -- they had a graphic design program. And I thought I could make a living doing graphic design and that it would be useful to movement work, right. I wanted to have -- have a skill that was both -- I could make a living at it, and it would be useful to movement work. That was my sort of thinking at the time. At about that time, I -- in 1984, I went out to San Francisco for -- there was a draft resis-- draft registration resistance conference there at -- at -- that coincided with the Democratic National Convention. There were protests at the Democratic National Convention. And I went there. And I saw this anarchist bookstore, which was sort of a center of activity during these demonstrations, which were very sort of militant, and rowdy, and confrontational. They had this thing that they called a war chest tour, where they went and targeted various corporations that had their headquarters in San Francisco that were financing the Democratic convention and that were involved in various crimes around the world. And so it was sort of a way of exposing the way in which the Democratic Party was -- was a pretty effective sort of piece of propaganda. Exposing the way the Democratic Party was very much tied into the war machine and things like that. So and I was very impressed with this bookstore. It was Bound Together Books. But it -- I was just -- the idea of having a physical space. And -- which is a -- obviously always a -- an important thing. And so I went back to Minneapolis, fiddled with this idea of we need a bookstore. And I sort of -- with some of my former libertarian friends, I put out this -- we -- we -- we organized this. It was a group to launch an anarchist bookstore. And after a year or so, we did. It -- we started out in the backroom of a left-wing bookstore called Mayday Books, which is still around. And then we moved into our own space for several years before the thing went belly-up. But in that period, we did -- we built sort of this kind of thriving anarchist scene of, you know, we -- there was a layer of us who were in our early, mid-twenties, and then a lot of high school students. And -- and we organized a war chest tour of our own. There -- there's a number of major corporations with headquarters in Minneapolis. And then found local elite targets, and sort of did -- did a repeat of that. And -- and in the mix -- roughly parallel to this, the -- the divestment movement jumps off around apartheid, around South Africa, in the mid-'80s at the university. And so I participated in that. There was a -- I initiated and temped at the art school I was at, which was a private art school and -- to get them to divest, which was never going to happen. Because they -- the board consisted -- it was a very different thing than a public university --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- where you have publically -- political appointees, right, sitting on the board here. It was all just overlap -- interlocking [00:15:00] -- everyone on the board represented one of the corporations that we were targeting. So it -- it wasn't going to happen. But -- but it was an interesting piece of it. And there was a police killing -- the police carried out a -- a raid -- I'm trying to remember the couple's name now. What was a -- supposed to be a drug raid on a house in north Minneapolis, which is one of the main sort of black neighborhoods in Minneapolis. And killed an elderly couple. They got the wrong house. They set off a -- a flash grenade and -- and yeah. And that led to a big sort of fight around police brutality, which I got involved in. Oh, and -- what's his name? Keith Ellison? Do you know Keith Ellison? He's the first Muslim congressman.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: But at the time, he was the leader of the Black Law School Students Association at the University of Minnesota. He was basically the leader of this fight against police brutality. And so these were the things we were involved in. And then a lot of Central America solidarity. But basically I was part of this anarchist crew. We eventually sort of coalesced into an organization called the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And we -- that -- our main deal was militancy, you know. We -- I mean, we had -- we had a larger political analysis that, you know, justified it. But our sort of -- what we viewed our tasks as was sort of raising the overall level of the militancy of the movements we were participating in. Not just by going out and doing it ourselves. But -- so sometimes doing that. But a lot by also just arguing for the need for more confrontational tactics. And -- and trying to patiently struggle with people who -- who are reluctant to do that. So.

Amaka: So were most -- you guys were doing a lot of direct action. Like, were you like -- you know, sitting in, pro-- like, you know.

Christopher: Yeah. That's -- yeah, good question. So -- so yeah. So my -- I got arrested at -- the first demonstration I got arrested at was actually when I was in New York. We went down to Washington DC. and had a

demonstration, an attempt to shut down selective service headquarters, the draft -- national draft board headquarters. And -- and that was my -- my -- my first arrest. And it was a standard sort of nonviolent civil disobedience. It was -- when I returned to Minnesota, I quickly got involved in a civil disobedience campaign at the time that was targeting the Honeywell Corporation, which is, in addition to making thermostats and various other sort of things, makes anti-personnel weapons. Or at -- at the time, made anti-personnel weapons. And the idea was to force them to get out of the -- the anti-personnel weapon business. There was a number of mass arrests, sort of mass civil disobedience actions that attempted to shut down their headquarters, which were in central Minneapolis. And so I participated in that. And so there was this fairly substantial layer of people engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience, mainly around anti-war stuff. People who were involved in -- usually Central America solidarity stuff, but sometimes for other international conflicts. But mainly around Central America. [Speaking to pet] Here, are you going to be a problem? Are you allergic?

Amaka: No.

Christopher: Okay. Yeah, you want more food, but you're not getting it. You -- you get your rations. [To interviewer] You can make the cat scat if you want.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Just --

Amaka: So at this time -- I mean, how would you describe -- I mean, how would you describe the general kind of political environment at the time? I mean, you sound like -- there sound -- there sounds to be, like, a lot going on --

Christopher: Right.

Amaka: -- in regards to kind of, you know, selective service. We have, you know, divestment. We have, you know, movements in Central America. Like there's a lot --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- going on. So can you [00:20:00] more generally describe the general political environment.

Christopher: Okay. Well, so it's the 1980s. It's -- it's -- it -- in many ways, it's a period of retreat from -- still from the movements of the '60s and '70s. Reagan is president and so on. But -- but Minneapolis is very much a progressive outpost, right. And, you know -- I mean, it's not quite the Bay Area, but it's -- in some ways, some similar dynamics. So you -- you have -- it's a relatively prosperous city. It's a liberal city. And the Twin Cities are, you know, relatively prosperous, politically liberal, reasonably large sort of left that is still around. And, yeah. So there's a -- definitely a sense of, we're not on -- it -- there's a widespread sense amongst the population of not being on board with what's going on nationally. So the political culture is still in many ways dominated by sort of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. And I -- you know, I -- I mentioned I grew up in left -- when I was 14 years old, I joined Americans for Democratic Action, which is this classic liberal organization. But I was recruited as a 14-year-old to it by -- or actually I think a little younger -- by a -- a family friend who'd sort of seen me as this politically precocious person. But within it, there was sort of a left. And I sort of quickly gravitated to it. But this was -- so -- you know, and I'd grown up around the University. And so I identified strongly with sort of student radicalism from the -- from the get. And the -- yeah. And so -- and yeah. So there's this strong sort of civil disobedience component that, you know, had roots going back into the '60s. There's a guy [Mark Davidoff?], who is sort of this local figure who'd participated in the -- did he participate in the Freedom Rides? He participated in -- in -- in some stuff with SNCC, I think. And then -- I -- I don't know if he was involved in the Freedom Rides. But he -- and then he had got -- he had done organizing around Honeywell during Vietnam. And now he had sort of revived this thing. And it had this mass -- pretty mass character. So -- but the prevailing ideology was what I would call sort of a left pacifism, right. And we were sort of the rowdy kids, sort of trying to -- we weren't the only rowdy kids. I mean, there was some other forces. But we were one of the groups of rowdy kids trying to push things further. And -- cat.

Amaka: Hello.

Christopher: If she's bothering you --

Amaka: She's not bothering me. It's okay.

Christopher: Okay. All right. She may try to bother you.

Amaka: [Cat meows] You like attention, huh?

Christopher: Yeah. Here. You want -- you want -- come here. Sorry.

Amaka: That's okay.

Christopher: When you get around to it.

Amaka: Anyway.

Christopher: So anyhow. Let's see. So yeah, so the -- so the political atmo-- so I'm very much sort of a product of the left in what is a pretty comfortable place to be on the left, you know. Sort of -- there's a sort of bubble quality that I think you probably know from the Bay Area. So. They have it here, too. But it's different here. It's --

so. Yeah. And then out of that, we formed this organization Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League. And in 1988, the US sends troops to Honduras to the border of Nicaragua in what looks like preparatory moves for an invasion of Nicaragua. And there are demonstrations all across the country against this. And in a number of places there are particularly militant demonstrations, including in Minneapolis. And -- and we gain some notoriety when a bowling ball is thrown through the plate glass window of the military recruiting station in the course of a major [00:25:00] demonstration. We had -- basically for four days, we have sort of major, unpermitted street demonstrations that are highly confrontational, and militant, and so on. And on the second day of those demonstrations, there's a march from this sort of, kind of yuppie shopping center neighborhood. There's a march towards the nearest military recruiting station, which is then trashed. And -- and most notably the bowling ball. And there's a whole history with that bowling ball. But in any event, it sort of -- the fact that it's a bowling ball makes the fact that we're the revolutionary anarchist bowling league -- we become a story. And -- and we grow. And we're -- and we get some national attention amongst at least like-minded people. And --

Amaka: How many people would you saw were involved? You said you guys grew.

Christopher: Yeah. We weren't huge. I mean, you know, probably at our height, we were like 30 people. But we had a large periphery of people who would come out for -- so we had -- part of the thing was we were sort of -- we were a -- conceived of ourselves as a cadre-type formation. Which was sort of unusual for anarchists, you know. But we had -- we had a sort of -- sort of peculiar self-conception in -- in that respect. And -- and then we had this larger circle mainly of high school students. We had people who were involved in -- in founding this group Anti-Racist Action, which would subsequently become a national organization. But it had its start kind of in this milieu. The -- and that was mainly involved in sort of combating Nazi skinheads at first. And then it got involved in stuff like police brutality and things like that. There was a -- so yeah. So we had, you know, two dozen people. I mean, we started out as like four or five people. And we grew to a -- to a few dozen. Two dozen, I'd say, a little more than that. And then, you know, people cycling through as that goes. And -- and we had a large periphery that -- so we could pull out a few hundred people for -- who were sort of generally sympathetic to what we were trying to do, even if they weren't in -- formally in the organization.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And -- and we put out a little publication called the RABL Rouser. R-A-B-L was the name, so RABL. And -- and we were very theatrical. We had a sort of -- a sort -- sort of element of humor in our stuff. And hence the bowling. We had sort of this thematic thing. And we -- and we sort of camped it up a bit. It was -- and -- and then -- but we -- we started looking around nationally for what to -- we -- we felt that being part of a local collective was insufficient. We wanted to be part of a national organization. And we didn't really see one. And therefore decided we were going to try and build one. And -- and sort of the vehicle for doing that was we put out a call to form -- to -- to create a North American anarchist newspaper. And -- I and another guy who was in the group went on a speaking tour. We drove around the country. Simultaneous with this, there's a series of anarchist gatherings who start -- in 1986, there's on in Chicago. And then in 1987, there's on in Minneapolis that we organized. So -- in which several hundred anarchists come to town for -- you know, to have workshops. It's like a conference with -- but also punk bands and, you know, vegetarian food, and lots of beer, and things like that. So -- and -- you know, so there's a -- it's a kind of political countercultural gathering thing. And we -- so there was one -- the first one was in Chicago, '86. Minneapolis, '87. Toronto, '88. [00:30:00] San Francisco, '89. And then there was an attempt to do one in Mexico, and it kind of fell apart. And that was sort of the end of that little sequence. But it created a space in which we were making a lot of contacts, mainly in the US and Canada at the time. And we sort of did this speaking tour, pulled together kind of a network of people who were committed to this idea of pulling together a newspaper. And -- and in the course of it, attracted a -- this tiny Trotskyist organization, the Revolutionary Socialist League, that was, you know, a product of the late-'60s upsurge, like a lot of these groups. And was sort of losing its members rather rapidly, and was kind of facing its own organizational mortality, but had some resources. It had a -- and they -- so they have like a couple dozen members, older, with some income, with an office, with equipment. And -- and they were moving in a -- towards anarchism for whatever reasons. And I mean, I could tell you the reasons that I -- that [interest grew, it's purpose?]. But they -- so they sort of sign up with this project, which is really very helpful. It gives us a resources base. It gives us a way of -- because otherwise we're a bunch of 21-year-olds working at Kinko's, and -- you know.

Amaka: Is the bookstore still open? Do you still have the bookstore?

Christopher: We -- no. We had a bookst-- so the bookstore, Back Room Anarchist Books, it -- it stumbles -- basically we had this -- this really great space. And the police leaned on the landlord. And the landlord finally tossed us out. Because we had gotten the space in a kind of funky way. The -- the landlord had not agreed to have an anarchist bookstore in his -- in his space. He was renting out a storefront as housing illegally. And when the

people who were living in it sort of invited us in, that was a sort of -- whatever. It was a kind of anarchist way of doing stuff.

Amaka: So you all didn't have a space. So this -- this --

Christopher: We did have a space up until -- we had a space when we had this gathering. So it -- so we -- yeah, so we had a -- and we lost the space right before I moved to New York. There's a period in which we moved into a little warehouse space, but it kind of fizzled at that point. And so I -- so basically, we had -- we end up having a conference in Chicago to launch this newspaper. We call it Love and Rage. And agreed to locate it in New York City. And I'm sort of hired as the first staff person, the facilitator. Which, you know, it's a completely subsistence -- hire -- you know, it's a pretty low salary. But I -- so I -- I move out to New York to work on this thing. And that's how I end up here the second time. And so I move out January of 1990. And -- and we put out this newspaper. And it's a bilingual newspaper. It's, you know -- English on one side. Spanish on the other. Eventually we split it in two, because that Mexican anarchist gathering gives rise to a group that decides to affiliate with us in Mexico City. And they sort of take over production of the Spanish language thing. And so we now have sort of -- Amor y Rabia and we have Love and Rage. And it's -- and it's -- and we're involved in all sorts of things around the US, Canada, and Mexico. But it's mainly US-centered. But it's got this sort of international aspect to it. We're involved in a lot of sort of anti-prison stuff, support for political prisoners of sort of a wide range. We are -- get involved in stuff around the Gulf War. And it's kind of, in many ways, a reproduction of the RABL politics on a national scale. We organized the first black bloc in the United States. We -- there was a [00:35:00] demonstration against the Gulf War, the first Gulf War, and -- and yeah. We organized a -- there was sort of a big march on Washing-- we organized a black bloc that broke away and attacked the IMF. Which, at the time, the IMF and World Bank were not on everyone's radar --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- the way that they became later in the '90s. And we -- and in '93 -- so we're trying to turn this newspaper into an organization. We have sort of a network of people who distribute it, collectives that are more or less loosely affiliated with it, that identify -- so there's a network. But within that network there's a core that's trying to turn it into an organization. But it's anarchists. And anarchists don't like to be organ-- it's like -- it's like herding kittens, you know. It just --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: They don't like it. And -- and so as we're making -- some of us are trying to make those moves. We got a lot of pushback. And in -- and in 1993 it looks like the thing's about to fall apart. And I'm -- you know, I'm in my late twenties. I don't have a college degree. I'm like, this organization looks like it's going to fall apart. I decide to go back to school. So I'm going to finish my degree and, you know -- and I'm going to be serious this time. I'm not going to let politics distract me. (laughter) So -- I'm not very good at that. And so I -- I go to -- I apply to go to Hunter. I look at CUNY. I -- I -- you know. It's a question of what I can afford.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And --

Amaka: Why Hunter out of the --

Christopher: Other --

Amaka: All the other CUNY schools?

Christopher: I looked around. There were -- I looked at City College. At the time, I lived up in Inwood. And so City College looked attractive. Part of it was I was -- I wasn't sure what I was going to go into, but I was thinking about going into black studies, right. And -- and it just looked to me like Hunter -- the black and Puerto Rican studies department there was going to be less freaked out about me than the one at City College. So -- so that was a little bit of it. Hunter -- City College has a -- had, at least -- a majority male student population. I mean, part of it -- I'm saying, like, I'm not going to get involved in politics. But I -- I'm always looking through the lens of what are the politics of the place I'm going to go to. And -- and I -- there'd been a -- there had been a student strike at -- at City University in 1991. And we were completely peripheral to it, but I had attended some demonstrations and gotten sort of a feel for it. And so there was a sense that women had a more prominent place in the activism at Hunter, because it was historically a women's college. And it's predominantly a female student population, unlike City College. And those were the two that I was giving serious consideration to.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Because they were in Manhattan. And I was -- I was in Manhattan then. And I think that's why -- I -- you know, I -- I don't remember exactly --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah. But -- but -- so I end up at -- I end -- I end up going to -- I end up applying to Hunter and being accepted. And then I -- and then our organization has this conference, which I think is going to be a fiasco, and we're going to just crash and burn, right? And instead we split.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Basically 50-50. I'm like, oh crap. We've built this thing up, and now it's half the size. But we split bec-- the lines on which we split were around tightening up the organization. The people who left were against tightening up the organization. The people who stayed were for tightening up the organization. I mean, I -- I'm sure other people see it differently. But that was the -- my understanding of the --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- basic division. And [00:40:00] within like several months, we're back to our full strength. Like all of these people who had been sort of waiting for us to get our act together and not joining the organization, suddenly come knocking. "Okay. You're going to get -- you're -- you -- you -- you're -- you -- you seem more serious." So all of a sudden, we fell through this sort of revival as an organization in the wake of this --

Amaka: So is it national at this -- I mean, is it still --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Yeah. So it was a national --

Amaka: Still.

Christopher: -- organization. We had groups in -- in, you know, the Bay Area, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, and Toronto --

Amaka: So even after the split, it's still very much --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- international?

Christopher: Yeah. Yeah. And so we lose people in different places.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And, in some places, we don't -- you know, we lose groups. But -- but it was a -- it was a pretty loose thing in the first place.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And so losing them, what it -- that ends up meaning is not entirely clear, you know, when the groups that stick around, in some sense, raise their level of commitment. And then -- and -- yeah. So -- and the Mexico group is coming into its own at this point.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And so in '93, they start publishing the Spanish language version of the paper. They're involved in various things. There's -- they run some articles about indigenous prisoners in Chiapas, which -- who knows about Chiapas?

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: We don't know about Chiapas. It's 1993. There's nothing to know about Chiapas. And then New Year's Eve -- you know, January 1st, 1994, the Zapatista uprising takes place. And we were on that like white on rice. We, like -- we immediately hitched our wagon to that. We were like -- and, I mean, part of it -- you have to under-- the sort of -- the political context of the early '90s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Tiananmen Square massacre, the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the negotiated end to sort of armed struggle and national liberation movements -- the -- the Oslo accords, Pales--

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Palestine, apartheid, the Contadora peace process in Central America, Ireland. So there's this radical shift that's taken place in the course of several years. Love and Rage is founded in November of 1989. I move here in January of 1990. But the world is going through -- and -- and -- and for the left, it's -- it's completely disorienting. And then there's the Gulf War, right? And -- and the US marches off to war against Iraq. And there's a big anti-war movement, and we're all excited. And then the war's over and the movement is completely demoralized. It's a complete -- because the US won.

Amaka: Yeah. Yeah.

Christopher: Right? I mean, that was the -- and at -- at very little cost, you know? And it -- and so there had been this whole Vietnam syndrome where -- this reluctance to send -- on the part of the ruling class in the US to involve the US armed forces in large-scale military conflict for fear of, you know, waking up the -- you know, the sleeping giant of anti-war sentiment in the country. And that looked like it had been killed with this. And so it's a very -- the -- the left is very much in retreat. And we're this little newly created revolutionary formation. And then the Zapatistas come along. And we're like -- you know, it's like a -- it's like a life preserver, or like -- ah, them.

Yes, that! And -- and so our Mex-- the folks from Mexico City just basically head right d-- you know, like literally commandeered -- you know, get in Volkswagens and --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- head to Chiapas. We send a couple of people down from New York. We get an early interview with Subcomandante Marcos. And it's a very funny interview to read. Because we're this anarchist group. And we're like -- we want them to be anarchists, right? And they're kind of [00:45:00] willing to go along with that up to a point, right? They're not. They're not going to call themselves anarchists. But they're very friendly to us.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: And -- and there is a sort of anarcho vibe to some of their stuff. And so -- and -- but this -- this interview consists -- it really is -- it's our people sort of trying to push their thing into our framework.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: And it's transparent. You read the thing. And you're like -- and Marcos is like, "No, no, no. We're this other thing." And they just keep going. There's a sort of -- and I remember reading it at the time. I'm like, this doesn't say what you think it says. All the parts where you think it's saying that, that's us talking, not them. You know? But it didn't matter. It was -- and the funny thing was actually that interview then gets -- circulates internationally. And if you want -- the sort of -- the moment at which sort of all these anarchist groups decide that the Zapatistas are -- are their guys, is very much tied to this interview that does not say what people think it says. But so -- which plants a seed of doubt in my mind, that -- but I'm also very excited about the Zapatistas. And so I'm at Hunter, 1994. So I start at Hunter in the fall of '94. I believe that's -- yeah. Is that right? Yeah. So I start at -- in the fall of '94, by which point the Zapatista stuff has like -- is cooking. You know, there's a -- and -- and there's a lot of solidarity activity. We're very much in the center. We're -- we form a group called Zapatista Solidarity Committee. We're -- we're translating and reproducing all of their communiqués and interviews and all of this into English. And -- and I mean, we're not the only people doing that.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But we're very much at -- at the center of doing that -- that stuff. And then I go to Hunter. And I'm like, I'm going to be a serious student. I'm not going to get distracted. And I'm walk -- I'm -- I remember I'm walking through the building -- there's a big auditorium. And there's something going on in the auditorium. And I look in the auditorium. And there's some administrators on stage. And there's, like, what must have been like 150 students standing up with their backs to the administrators. I'm like, what's going on? I'm like -- you know, I -- I can't go anywhere without walking into, you know, trouble. And I'm like -- so I go in. And I, you know, I'm like, well, I don't know what the issue is. But I know which side I'm on. So I -- you know, I turn my back. I'm like -- (laughs). And -- and what it is is that they're -- they're cutting the SEEK program. They're not eliminating it, but they're -- they're budget cuts that -- that -- they're -- they're paring down the SEEK program and eliminating certain features of the SEEK program. And it's mainly SEEK students engaged in this protest. And -- and then sort of after the protest there's a meeting in the student government offices. And I start -- I just go. I'm like -- and I get sort of swept in the -- and this is sort of how I get pulled into the movement at CUNY is -- so this initial fight back around SEEK. And -- and then there's a -- we decide we're going to go up to the administration office and demand a meeting. And we get a meeting -- I don't know who -- if we get the president. We definitely get Sylvia Fishman and -- who's dean of students. And -- and so we have this meeting up in their offices. And -- you know, there are like 20 of us.

Amaka: So was it SEEK students who were --

Christopher: It's mainly SEEK students.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Yeah. But it's not exclusively SEEK --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: It's SEEK students, some student government people, and then, you know, myself and, you know -- I -- I don't know who else is in my --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- path -- plane. My -- I'm just like, you know, where -- where there's struggle, join it. You know? And so I -- and -- but I have a very vivid memory of the -- them -- of the administrators saying, you know, this -- you know, "This is just a [00:50:00] -- we're just" -- they were eliminating some kind of tutoring or some sort of particular aspect of the remedial --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- services that they provided. Which -- and -- or altering what you got credit for, some-- I forgot the particulars. I don't remember the particulars. But I remember them sort of basically -- you know, trying to minimize what this thing was about, right. And -- and I watched, you know, some of the student government people

start to, like, buy it. You know, and I'm like -- and I remember -- and I said, you know, I said -- I said, "It's never about what it's about. You know, it's -- there's -- it's always part of a larger process. This is a -- yes, they're coming to take something away. It's not the biggest thing. They'll come for that."

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: "Right? If we -- if we don't stop them here, they're going to keep coming." And I said, "They're going to" -- you know. And -- and then I said, you know, "They're going to keep dismantling SEEK" -- which I barely knew what SEEK was at this point. But I knew it mattered to people.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And I said, "And then they're going to come after the ethnic studies programs." And then Dean Fishman was, "We would never do" -- you know. And I'm -- and I was like, "Mark my words." I was like, "They're going to. You know, they -- this is how this works."

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and -- and I was like, "All right." So -- and so this is my initial sort of foray into stuff. And then -- this is the fall of '94. And then starting in -- in January of '95, they -- they announce budget cuts that will be paid for with tuition hikes and layoffs, right? Retrenchment. And -- and stuff begins -- and so you've gotten -- you probably have a -- I don't know who you've interviewed who was in '95.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: [Rushal?] and [Lorena?] and so. So --

Amaka: [David Zuker?].

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah, so this is like the beginnings of the CUNY Coalition in regards to the response to this retrenchment.

Christopher: Yeah. So it -- and so -- yeah. So the -- I mean, the CUNY Coalition, as I would later learn, was sort of a thing that kept rea-- you know.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: It -- there's always a CUNY Coalition.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Whenever there's a struggle at CUNY, there's a CUNY Coalition. And there's some continuity in terms of personnel from -- from year to year. But -- but this is when I -- when it's new for me. And it's -- and there had been a relative lull since '91. So there had been, like, essentially four years. So a lot of the experienced activists from '91 had aged out in one way -- you know --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Graduating, or dropping out, or moving on in one way or another. In any event, were not --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Yeah. I mean, there were some. But not -- there -- there was a relatively small group. And I -- I remember I was taking a history of jazz class with Ann -- I forgot who the -- the professor was. But it was cross-listed between black and Puerto Rican Studies and the music -- the music department or -- it was a really good class. And that's where I met Jed.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: So we were both in -- in that class. And -- and -- and got to talking. And -- and so the two of us start sort of trying to figure out, what's going on? What are the meetings? What's happening? So -- and he sort of plugs into stuff a little quick. He gets -- he becomes aware of some citywide meetings and -- and -- and I can't reconstruct all of the details. But he -- but at some point fairly early on in February, if not January -- classes begin in late January, so probably first week of February. We're going -- we go to a citywide meeting, right. And we're the first people from Hunter at this meeting. So [00:55:00] the -- the coalition is in formation.

Amaka: Okay. How many -- so at this first meeting, or when you start --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- going to these meetings, like how many people is it? And what schools do you remember being --

Christopher: Yeah. OK, so I think the first meeting we were at was a -- probably two or three dozen people. It was a pretty respec-- it was at the graduate center, which at the time was located on 42nd Street. And they had student government. It had offices. And we -- so we met there. And -- and that was the main meeting space for the CUNY Coalition in 1995. There had been previous practices of moving -- and this is always a tension for CUNY -- of rotating meetings around the city versus having them in Manhattan, right. And there's -- and the problem with having them in Manhattan is whoever -- if you -- if you can have a consistent site, there's a tendency for the site school to dominate the coalition.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But if you try and move them, rotating them amongst the outer boroughs, you get much less consistency in terms of participation. It's -- it's sort of -- it's a fundamental sort of challenge to CUNY work. And I think there had been previous meetings at -- so I think Bronx Community College was in the mix. I think BMCC was in the mix. I think City College was in the mix at this point. I think Staten Island was in the mix. Brooklyn College. So it was kind, I think, striking that -- that Hunter was not. I don't know if York was represented. York had a very strong December 12th group there. And so I don't know if -- I -- I don't want to say that other schools weren't there.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: But those were the ones that I recall being there. And there was definitely like -- finally Hunter's here, right? Hunter is me, Jed, and a couple other people that he had --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- found at Hunter and dragged down there, I think. And there are a number of demonstrations coming up. NYPIRG has plans for their annual lobby day. You know, which -- basically every spring they organize CUNY students and SUNY students to and lobby. And there's a rally, and it's a sort of ritualized part of the NYPIRG thing. So that's coming up. Their bu-- the budget is hitting a lot of other areas, including -- including health care in particular. There's, like, hospital closings and cuts to funding for, you know, home health care workers and things. There's a bunch of different things there. So there's some mobil-- there's some labor mobilizations that are taking place. And -- and we're basically talking, what are we -- what's -- what's CUNY going to do? And there's sort of several things that are in the mix. One is there's the history of occupations.

Amaka: Yes.

Christopher: And -- that looms large in the imaginations of -- of everyone who knows about that history. And everyone, if they don't know about it, finds out about it in these meetings. And -- and at the same time, there's a fear, because the -- sort of this -- CUNY has become a lot more -- in -- the 1989 strike was a disaster for CUNY central administration. They basically -- the strike won, right? 1991 was a very different thing. And part of why it was a different thing was the -- was they had altered the sort of repressive measure. They -- the disciplinary process was reorganized. The SAFE team was created. The -- so there was a lot more repression. There was a lot more threat that people would get thrown out of school. And -- and I remember, actually, Ron McGuire, who was there sort of in his capacity as, you know, legal advice, but also as sort of an institutional memory of the movement. Because he goes back to '69. Him giving this very sort of discouraging speech around -- around occupations, basically. Because you don't want to get thrown out of school. And he had been thrown out of school. But -- and so he's like -- and I -- and I remember, [01:00:00] I'm like, "You're our lawyer. That's not your job. You don't set strategy." Right? Yeah, I'm like, "We -- we'll discuss what the risks are. You tell us what the legal situation is. And we discuss" -- and I -- I love Ron. And we developed a very close friendship after that. And he -- and he, in fact -- he -- he, like, accepted the criticism and stepped back. He was very good. And -- but I remember this sort of initial thing. But it was true that -- that -- that -- that -- I'm -- that he -- I mean, he wasn't -- he wasn't talking out of his hat. He -- you know. And -- and so people were not actually ready to carry out occupations.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And -- and so there was sort of a kind of like -- how do we do something that has a similar impact? And -- and it's in this context that the idea of shutting down Wall Street comes up, right. In early 1990, when I'd just moved to New York and I had just taken up work with Love and Rage, the left Greens and the youth Green -- there -- there were a number of Green and environmental groups that had a -- a -- what was it called? It was -- they had an Earth -- Earth Day action at Wall -- or Wall Street Earth Day -- Earth -- Earth Day Wall Street action, right?

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: In which they basically attempted to shut down Wall Street. It was a sort of direct action, mass civil disobedience, by these, you know, mainly white, environment-- you know, middle-class environmental activists. But sort of the more radical wing of the environmental movement. Had attempted to shut down Wall Street. So I was -- and it -- it was an interesting set of actions. And CUNY -- there was a -- I -- I remember there was a -- there -- so this is '90. There was some CUNY stuff that was happening at the time, between '89 and '91. There was some interaction between -- there was -- so there was a march later that same year, I think. Or maybe it was '91. There was a march on Wall Street.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Right? And there was -- there was a breakaway from the march on Wall Street where -- so there was a -- the larger legal thing went to Wall Street. And then a breakaway went and attacked the American Stock -- not the New York Stock Exchange. The American Stock Exchange. It was sort of anarchos, but also other -- sort of the more -- some of the more militant CUNY forces. And then regrouped. So there had been this sort of history of targeting Wall Street that we had come out of, that had been previous -- had previously occurred in the -- so -- in --

in the CUNY stuff. And so the idea of targeting Wall Street was taken up very enthusiastically. And -- and then we got into a whole question of whether to apply for a permit.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And -- and that was a -- and there were -- I -- I was an anarchist. And Jed had come out of the -- he was sort of a red diaper baby from sort of the Maoist, red -- Revolutionary Communist Party's scene. And -- and there were a number of other folks in the room. But we were definitely -- the two of us were the loudmouth proponents of the don't get a permit approach. And -- and there were a couple -- I think it went on for a couple of weeks of sort of struggling within this sort of nascent CUNY Coalition. Back at Hunter we start building a group at Hunter. Which, I mean, which we do by roaming the hallways during classes, going into classes without permission, making speeches about how, you know, this tuition hike is going to force, you know, the poorest students out of -- it's going to rob everybody. And it's going to force the poorest students out of -- and come to a meeting, [01:05:00] and da da da da. And -- and, you know, our first meeting we have 30-some people. It's a lot of familiar faces from the SEEK stuff. A lot -- you know. But this is where -- I think where we meet Sandra, where we meet Rochelle, where we meet Lenina. Lenina's working with NYPIRG. Rachel is with the DSU. Sandra -- I don't know if she was part of the Colombian student club. But, yeah, there's -- I think so. So there were -- you know, so, this sort of nucleus. And there are a number of other people who sort of didn't necessarily hang around. Suheir Hammad, the Hammad sisters, but at the time Suhair was really the most visible of the bunch, at least to me. So there was a whole -- a lot of the core of what will become Hunter SLAM! comes together very quickly at -- at this point. And we started participating very actively in -- in the meetings downtown. And -- and Hunter becomes sort of a vocal force arguing for the positions that Jed and I had argued for around the permit. And -- and at a certain point, we decide we, you know -- shut the -- the slogan is shut the city down, march on Wall Street, have a date. And we make this decision not to get a permit. And -- and I remember very -- I was like, this decision could disappear in a week, right? You know, we -- we've been going back and forth, right, on like -- and -- I said, "We need a flyer immediately," right? I said, "We need to popularize what we've just sort of won in a meeting but that could disappear" -- you know, if a larger contingent from this school's student government shows up at the next meeting, we're going to be in a -- you know. It's this highly fluid thing in terms of what the politics are. And -- and I remember making -- we -- making a flyer. Very simple, but with the slogan very prominently featured. And -- and there had been much agonizing about what are our demands. And I -- and I'm always like -- I'd always been like, you know, demands matter. But on some level what matters is the people who are inert becoming a force, right? And -- and -- and you need to capture people's imaginations more than you need to, like, formulate the perfect demands. And -- and we were convinced that -- shut down Wall Street -- so -- would do it. And I remember we designed the flyer. We took it -- the -- the graduate student government -- graduate center student government -- Rob [Hollander?] at the time. And they had a -- this giant copier. And we were like, "Can you make copies of this?" And he was like -- he immediate-- it wasn't just him. It was all of them. They -- the -- the graduate students were very resistant to what we were up to.

Amaka: Oh, the march -- or the unpermitted thing?

Christopher: The unpermitted thing, initially. People -- a lot of people changed the -- this is the thing about student work.

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: People go through profound political transformations in weeks and months, you know, that -- you know.

Amaka: He spoke a little bit about that, though.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: About the initial being like, what? How does Wall Street even connect -- like, why were we marching on Wall Street?

Christopher: Oh, that's interesting. I would --

Amaka: He talked about it.

Christopher: That's good. I -- I would be very interested in seeing -- no, you know. I -- I -- I -- I -- I mean, I'm -- I'm still friends with him. I like him.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: He's like -- but -- but I remember we brought the flyer to him. And he was like, "No. We can't do it. We've got this other copying we have to" -- I'm like, "You've got -- this is a flyer for the demonstration we just agreed on, with the slogans we just agreed on, with all the things we just agreed on." And he was like putting obstacles up. And I knew that he knew what I knew, which was that all of the decisions that were embodied in this flyer could be reversed.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and so he was -- and I was like, "Motherfucker." I was like -- so -- so I went to Kinko's. I was like, I'm just going to -- I'm going to empty by bank ac-- you know, I didn't have that much -- you know, I'm -- but I'm going to, like, blow \$100, and I'm going to -- I'm going to -- there will be flyers.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And -- and they will represent this body. And they will be [01:10:00] out before the next week's meeting. And they will make this a reality. And so I went to Kinko's. And I -- and I remem-- and I asked for, I think, 5,000 flyers. Or -- yeah. One -- one big crate of flyers. And -- and -- and then I came and picked them up the next day. And -- and I just -- that'll be \$10. You know, what -- I don't remember the exact -- but -- but -- but it was one of those, like, you know, having friends in low places.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: You know, it was like -- so -- so I didn't have to go broke. And we got them. And then we -- we went -- I -- I -- we went to this labor march. There was an -- 1199 called a demonstration. And we just -- you know, there was some students there. But we just flyered the hell out of the thing. And then just took up the chant -- I -- you know, "Shut down Wall Street," or -- I for-- you know. I forget the exact -- but -- but yeah. It was a -- basically the -- the chant -- the -- the slogan of the flyer. It was -- and people took it up. And the union people didn't care. It was vague and in the future.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And, you know -- I mean, they would eventually become, you know -- you know, position themselves in opposition to this. But -- but the rank and file were cer-- everyone's like, yeah, Wall -- you know. Wall Street, that seems like a good target, you know. It had an immediate, obvious appeal. But it was also a very rad-- I mean, it was a radical tar-- choice of target, right? There -- there were some people for whom it was not intuitive. And then there were large --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- groups of people for whom it was. And it -- it was a sort of -- and -- and yeah. And so we just started getting it out. And we -- and we got it out to as many campuses as we could. And we -- so that first week we're doing this very aggressively. Just getting it out so that when people come to the next meeting -- and we'd printed up a whole other batch of these -- it's -- it's a fait accompli. It's like we've got an agreement of what we're going to do.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And I think actually -- yeah, there was the -- there was the labor thing. And then there was the NYPIRG thing.

Amaka: The Lobby Day?

Christopher: Lobby Day. And Lobby Day -- that may have been the first thing we did.

Amaka: Yeah, I think a lot -- from what I -- from hearing people, people usually tell it Lobby and then the -- the -- the big city hall.

Christopher: Well, yeah. Lobby -- yeah. City hall thing comes -- is March 23rd. So Lobby Day is sometime in late February.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So -- yeah. No, that's definitely the sequence. I -- I -- I'm just -- the immediate thing after the flyer comes out. So we went up to Lobby Day and -- with a ton of flyers. And our basic orientation -- I mean, part of it is we're like -- part of the problem with the CUNY Coalition is that there is the role of student governments, which tend to be conservative, right? That tend to be tied into the Democratic Party, and that are -- a lot of aspiring future elected officials --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- in their ranks. And they're -- they're -- you know, they're scared of, you know, getting in trouble with the administration. And they're scared of being seen as -- you know. It just -- it's who they are. And -- and in the absence of actual sort of mass activity on a particular campus, they're the representatives of -- they're the student leadership. And so -- so we went up to Lobby Day and -- and you've heard the basic rap about -- so there's a big rally. And it's just one -- one -- you know, NYPIRG speaker, after elected official, after union official. And it's tedious and unbearable. It's just -- it's one of these, like, soul-crushing rallies. [01:15:00] But the crowd is seething. And we're handing out our shut the -- shut down Wall Street stuff. Which is having an agitational effect.

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: It's like -- and -- and -- and people start chanting, "March! March! March!" Right? And -- and I don't know if NYPIRG officially decides, OK, we're going to go on a march, right? You know, because a march is supposed to happen, you know.

Amaka: Okay. Okay.

Christopher: So -- but what the march is -- because it's -- I don't know if you know the layout of Albany, but there's -- so we're by the Capitol. And then there's this sort of -- there's a big circle you can walk around, right? It's a long -- it's basically a long promenade that has two sides. So you can go up it and come back, right? And so this is the projected march. And so they're going to like lead us up this promenade, down the promenade, back to the rally space outside the --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Outside this -- but once people get moving, the movement is -- it takes on its own energy. And it -- it ceases to be NYPIRG's baby. It's just -- it -- and there's a crew, the Student Power Movement, which is, you know, Orlando, and John Kim, and Kamau, and a number of other people. They have a crew at Baruch. And then -- and then they have like people from non-CUNY --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: From some non-CUNY schools. And -- and so we hook up with them. They're -- they seem to have the right spirit for this thing. And there's this moment where we're headed back towards the -- the Capitol building. NYPIRG is basically setting up their marshals to channel us back into the area in front of the state capitol where we can, like, continue to rally. And instead a bunch of us head right into the Capitol building. And this -- the marshals try to stop us. The police try and stop us, but it doesn't work. And we're a large enough crowd, and we bust into the thing. And I just remember people chanting -- and this was the Student Power Movement. People were chanting, "Revolution! Revolution!" You know, on one level, it's sort of militant posturing out of proportion to the realities of the time. On the other hand, it's infectious, right? And -- and -- and once you're in the atrium of the -- of the state capitol, it is echoing, right? It's loud

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: It's not just -- and so there's this crowd of several hundred people. We've sort of occupied the atrium against the wishes of the sort of moderate forces. And we're chanting revolution. We start -- you know, there's -- people start giving speeches, and more militant chants, and so on. And then eventually, it becomes clear -- one, is the police are able to sort of secure the doors eventually. So there's a crowd outside and there's a crowd inside. And it's clear -- at a certain point, it becomes clear that we're going to face arrests if we stick around. So, you know, discretion being the better part of valor we march out, right? Hyped. Completely hyped. And we take the crowd. And -- and -- and -- and again, they try and get us back to the rally. Because there -- there are speakers who haven't spoken yet, right? (laughter) You have so-and-so, such-and-such legislator was promised a speaking spot and has not gotten to address us. And instead we march down to the -- the board of education, the department of education headquarters, which is a few blocks down. And basically repeat the thing. Storm into the -- into the building, shout "Revolution," carry on, etc., etc., the threat of arrests, and eventually we --

Amaka: March.

Christopher: But -- so that's it. It's just -- it's this charged action, very low cost. I don't know if -- I don't recall if there were any arrests. There might have been a couple. I don't recall. And -- and it puts an enormous amount of wind in the sails of our action. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention that I forgot to tell the people on the bus that I came up with that I got a car ride, and I [01:20:00] -- and the people on the bus waited for me for a -- like a couple hours.

Amaka: Did they think you got arrested or something?

Christopher: Yes. It was terrible. I know. So -- but there I was. So yeah. I got a car ride with the crew from -- a crew from Brooklyn College. And I was like, we need to win over Brooklyn College to this perspective. And so I'm like -- so we spent -- I spent two and a half hours in the car doing that. Then they were all, you know -- and -- because everyone's excited. Everyone's -- you know, it was like -- it's -- it's infectious and -- and it's late February. It's not even spring yet, you know. And -- is this the stuff you want? I don't --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, okay. I don't know -- yeah, I --

Amaka: This is perfect.

Christopher: Okay. And then -- and then sort of the agitation for the March 23rd stuff commences. And we've got almost a month.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: You know. I -- because this was like February 27th or something, I don't know. You can do -- you can check on that. But -- but there are all these other demonstrations. There's teach-ins that are planned by the PSC, there's all sorts of different things going on. I -- I had this one experience. I was -- I was a nanny. I was -- I was a -- I worked in childcare a lot. And I -- at the time I was working as a nanny for this little boy. And I'd drop him off at -- at his daycare. I -- I would go and pick him up in the morning and drop him off, and then pick him up, and then -- and then his mom would come. So I had this gig. And I dropped him off. And I was getting back on the train.

And there were students from -- is it LaGuardia High -- what's the -- what's the -- there's the elite high school and MLK high school that are across the street from each other? I don't know. Near -- near Lincoln center. Anyhow, there are two high schools that have very different demographic profiles that are right across the street from each other. And -- and -- but they were leafleting students who were showing up for class. I -- I just dropped him off in the morning. And it's the flyer that I designed with the bottom reworked for a high school student's contingent. And I'm like, this is a positive development.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: You know -- you know, I'm like, that's a sign of something, right? And -- and at this point, high school students start showing up for the meetings. Not in large numbers, but representing something that's clearly afoot in the high schools, right. And this -- this is spreading in the high schools.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And I don't know if the flyer itself said that the march was unpermitted, you know. But certainly the language was highly suggestive. And we publicized the fact that it was not permitted. And so this produces pushback, particularly from the PSC.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And the PSC at the time is under the control of this conservative caucus that will eventually be defeated by the new caucus, which is the sort of more progressive leadership that is now in control of the PSC. But the new caucus is operating under the discipline of the union. They're not going to oppose the official position of their own union --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- in a coalition with students, right. And in any event, they're -- they're not that radical. They're -- they're not so radical that they were -- that they thought our plan for an unpermitted demon-- but part -- there's this whole thing is -- is the PSC going to sign onto this --

Amaka: To march, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah. And there was a sense in which I -- I -- I -- I forgot the particulars were. But there was a sort of -- I think there was a sense in which they had kind of -- they were sort of halfway committed already. And now they were in a position of having to step back from it. That -- and I think part of it was that there was this dilemma that the new caucus people had been participating in the CUNY Coalition, right. But in order to get the official endorsement of the union, which I don't think we got --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: I don't know. I don't recall. I don't think we got it. I remember going to a meeting. And -- and -- and it was sort of [01:25:00] the rowdies from the CUNY Coalition, some -- the head of the USS, who was the, you know, head of this CUNY-wide student government.

Amaka: So the new caucus, you said later on -- at this point, there's more conservative leadership to the PSC.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: New caucus later on takes over.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: So when they take -- those -- when they take over, are they the ones that are like, you know, the -- when remediation continues to be threatened in CUNY. And they -- like, there's the -- the report that [the DO?] and all of the -- whatever that committee that Giuliani put together on CUNY -- when they produce that report and the PSC produced their own report saying that it was basically bullshit, like was that --

Christopher: Yeah, that --

Amaka: That was the new caucus?

Christopher: I believe that was the new caucus.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Yeah, yeah. That -- that makes sense. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, the new caucus sort of gathered the sort of most progressive elements within -- within the union. And so -- and so they were sort of fighting campus by campus the new caucus for leadership within the union. They were sort of winning leadership of the different chap-- the campus chapters. But that process was not particularly advanced in -- in '95. I mean, they had been doing it for a little while. I don't know how long, exactly. But they -- so -- so we're getting a lot of pushback from the PSC, but also from 1199, basically saying, "You need to apply for a permit if you want the endorsement of" --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- "of us and the resources we could bring," etc., etc. But we've got -- we've got a large group of students who are really amped about the kind of demonstration of as being. But we spend an enormous amount of time sort of fighting a rearguard action. It's -- every week some new group of people show up and say, "We want to be a part of this, but," right? And, you know, and so we have to re-have the argument every week. And -- and the

decision gets -- it's -- we always make the same decision. But it's -- but it's a tight -- you know, it's a -- it's a -- it's a funny business. And -- and -- and there's all sorts of predictions. You know, you're going to depress turn-- you know, this could be really big if you -- you know. But if you stick to your guns on this, it's going to be small. You're going to be -- la da da da da. So. And people are anxious that that might be true. A week before the demonstration there is an action at Hunter, which I think is connected to a PSC teach-in or something, but then -- followed by a rally. And there's a -- and -- and we -- the -- the students in the art or theater department organize a sort of funeral procession for CUNY, right. With caskets and all of this. And they're sort of marching around the buildings, and they're marching around. And at a certain point they march out into the -- into the street, right. And the crowd follows them. And then we take over the intersection. And then the police come. And -- and it's a very spontaneous --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- thing. And it really gets, you know -- it's -- it's certainly not -- we didn't plan it. We supported it as it happened. And it -- the energy really came from the people who had -- these -- who had done the -- the -- the funeral procession.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: They just thought they could go into the street. And then once they were in the street, we were in the street. And then the police were telling us we had to get out of the street. And we were like, "No, we're not getting out of the street." And -- and the news is there. And -- and we don't get out of the street. And then there are a bunch of arrests. There's like eight arrests. But it's -- it's on the news. And it -- it helped set the tone. It's a -- it's -- there's a very confrontational aspect to, you know -- the -- it -- it sets the tone. The news is talking about how there's a demons-- they're advertising our demonstration, you know.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: That this is -- there's a big demonstration planned, etc., etc. And there's a -- and there's a bunch of, you know -- Governor Pataki [01:30:00] makes some public appearances in different places. And people are shouting him down.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So there's a sort of rising tide of popular discontent around this budget. And we're feeding it big time. And it's -- and it's just -- it's increasingly sort of confrontational. And -- and then November -- then March 23rd happens. And it is -- it's huge. It's -- you know, we bring several thousand people from Hunter College on -- down on the trains. I think the best estimates were 25,000 people. I've heard upwards of 40, but I think it was 25,000. Probably half of them are high school students. I mean, the high schools are -- turn out massively. CUNY turns out -- you know, very respectable. Half of this crowd would be a very respectable CUNY demonstration. And it is now twice as big because, like, countless high schools have walked out. The high school piece really took off. And all of the faculty who had said, "We can't go," came. You know -- or not all, but, you know. You had to go, you know. And -- and -- and it was huge. And it was electrifying, and exciting, and there was a rall-- there -- there were speeches. And it was a fiasco. And there was --

Amaka: How did that go? I heard -- so it's like this big rally. And then the march -- the unpermitted march happens. But at the rall--

Christopher: It doesn't happen.

Amaka: Oh, well --

Christopher: Yeah, I mean, something happens.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Something happens. So who is -- like who is slated to speak at this? Like, how -- what does --

Christopher: Yeah. So I -- I was not involved in the logistics of the stage. Jed, you could talk to about that. Oh, one of the other things was that there was a decision not to let -- let elected officials speak, which was -- that really pissed -- there's a whole layer of people who were really pissed about that. And -- and -- and so -- yeah. So there was a sound truck. I'm trying to remember who got the sound truck. Some -- I don't -- the student government, or some union, or some -- somebody got a sound truck. And that served as a platform. And there were speeches. And there good speeches and -- I wasn't listening to the speeches. You know, it was -- I was moving through the crowd trying to find people, hold together the forces that were -- you know. And the thing is is -- I mean, part of it was we're surrounded by -- we're in City Hall Park, which at the time does not have --

Amaka: All that green space.

Christopher: What?

Amaka: All that green space doesn't -- everyone talked about City Hall Park looking very different than it does now. There was more space.

Christopher: Yes, there was more -- yeah, they had -- Giuliani had not put up the fences that made it -- so there was a deliberate sort of restriction of it as a public gathering space. So it was a much more viable public gathering space. That said, it was surrounded by police barricades. And it was full. It was packed. And so there were thousands of people in the streets off of -- off to the side of -- of City Hall Park, right. And then Broadway was basically controlled by the police. And they're, like, letting traffic through and so on. But so you have these sort of other groups that can't get to the main body of the demonstration. And -- and the demonstration itself is big. And -- and then there's this struggle going on on the stage, you know, as the elected officials try and get -- get on anyway. And -- and -- yeah. So -- and so people who are party to that should tell you, because I -- I'm not going to recollect it correctly. The -- and -- I'm there with Hunter people. But there are -- I also -- all of my anarchist friends, all the people from the Lower East Side, all the people from Love and Rage, all the different -- they're all there, too. [01:35:00] And this is where I -- it sort of becomes apparent to me that, while there -- there's some very awesome things about what we're doing, we're also really not prepared for what we've taken on. We are -- and there is a massive police presence that is determined not to let us march on Wall Street. We -- we have sort of publicly declared our intention to have an unpermitted demonstration. It's been in the media for weeks. It's an object of public discussion.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And -- and they're -- and Giuliani is mayor, right? You know. And -- and he's determined that not we're not going to get out of that park and march on Wall Street. Because if we marched on Wall Street, who knows what we would have done in Wall Street, you know. You know -- but the crowd is pushing against the police, in part because it's just overcrowded, you know. But also -- and then the -- people are shouting, you know, "March, march." There's a whole sort of -- nope. People don't want to listen to the speeches no matter who the speakers are. And --

Amaka: I guess someone kept talking about -- it was just, like, the speeches were just going on and on and on.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: It was like, you just wanted to get up and move.

Christopher: Yeah. Well, part of it was that there was -- there was a sort of tactical leadership that had been elected that represented sort of the full range of participants in the coalition, with all of the internal contradictions that implied. And so, while there had been a commitment to a certain kind of -- to marching on Wall Street, in -- in -- at the actual moment, there's a failure of nerve. And for -- you know, for understandable reasons, right? Not -- I mean, I think there are some -- there was political reasons that -- you know, they -- people who had never supported that and who had sort of grudgingly been dragged along are now in the -- in a position of -- able to drag their feet in -- in the tactical team.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And so there's sort of -- nobody can see a way to break through the police, right. But in part it's because they're not -- they're not trying. And they're -- they don't think that way. They don't -- that's not how they think about what to do at a demonstration. So the people there with experience breaking through police lines is -- there's a much smaller subset of. And, you know -- but we're scattered. And we're -- so I -- and I'm -- I have -- I'm torn. I'm with all these Hunter students who I helped bring down, etc., etc., who are going through this process of politicization and radicalization, etc. But who have no -- with the limit -- with a limited --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- some limited exceptions, have almost no experience in this sort of confrontation with police, right. People may have bad interactions --

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: -- with the police. But this kind of confrontation -- and then I have my anarchist buddies, right, who are -- are talented in this. You know, who do have some experience doing this, who have -- but who are not connected to this movement, right. And who are white and who are -- I don't want to listen to elected officials, but the -- the anarchists are, like, sort of seething about the -- they're getting distracted by some of the stuff that's going on onstage. They're -- and -- and more importantly, I think they're like -- they're not attuned to sort of the dynamics amongst the mass of students, who are ready to fight, who are sort of -- you know, who are open to a level of militancy, but who are still in the process of politically figuring out --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- what they think about the Democratic Party, what they think about -- who knows about unions. You know, the -- the -- so -- and so there was a -- sort of an impatience with -- with people's political confusion. Or -- you know, or -- or just their -- where they're at in their process of political development. So the anarchists are self-isolating. The CUNY people who want to bust through don't know how -- there are other people who could conceivably make this happen. But part of it is fin-- pulling the forces together who could do -- I mean, what you

need to do -- I mean, just at a -- you need to find -- you need to focus your forces on a single point, and you need to break [01:40:00] that point. And you need to break into the street. And in order to do that, you need some determined people who are willing to get arrested and get their heads cracked. You know, you -- you -- you -- that's what you need. All of the ingredients are there. But you -- getting them into a place --

Amaka: They're not organized.

Christopher: But the -- the more militant people are tending to gravitate towards the south of the park, the part closest to where you would go if you were to go to Wall Street. And tussles are breaking out with the police. And then bottles get thrown. And the police start wading into the crowd, and arresting people, and beating people, and, you know, hitting people, and -- and dragging them off. And so -- so what it turned into is this prolonged skirmish with the police, right. And we never break out.

Amaka: So all of this energy is still concentrated at the park. No one has -- no one has been able to really get outside of this park area.

Christopher: No. Except there are groups in the street, right. And there's a -- you know, there is a subsequent attempt to sort of -- as the thing ends up -- as the energy level lowers, there is a -- people do march to BMCC with -- and there's a hope to maybe take it somewhere. But there's -- there's a lot of sort of groups that are able to head out north but no one is able to head out south, right. I mean, the police know what they're doing. They're letting the energy disperse --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- in -- in dribs and drabs in the other direction. And as people get frustrated, people leave in small groups or large groups. But they're not large enough that they can take the thing --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- as a crowd. And so there's -- but the -- but it goes on for hours, right. There's this hours -- first of speeches of -- and etc. And then -- and then a prolonged period of basically skirmishing with the police in this sort of southwestern corner of -- of the park. And, you know, it's a -- it's a very -- summing up this experience -- I mean, we spend the next year in effect summing it up, right. But the -- you know, and my views on it change -- have changed several times over -- you know, over the course of it. But -- you know, the bottom line was we did not go in -- the people who wanted to take it in a more militant direction spent all of their energy fighting a rearguard action--rear guard stuff to keep it -- keep it the way we had wanted. And therefore, did not have a coordinated plan for the actual day that was able to make it happen. And part of it was the plan we had did not anticipate the numbers we had. And -- and the ability to not move in the -- the difficulty of moving within this, like, large, packed-in crowd, made the sort of tactical coordination that was -- that the situation needed, impossible. We were unable to -- to do it. So it was a failure, I think, on that tactical -- we did not shut down Wall Street, right. We did not do the thing that we had said we were going to do. It was a huge demonstration. It was probably the largest demonstration of, you know, black and -- predominantly black and Latino youth in the history of the city since at least the 1960s. You know, I mean, it was a very substantial accomplishment. And -- and yet -- but it had this very mixed quality in terms of what people -- and so in the aftermath, right, the people who had argued for an unpermitted demonstration said, "You said that no one would come. Look how many people came to an unpermitted demonstration." And the other people said, "You said you'd shut down Wall Street. Instead you got 40, you know, largely random people arrested." And Mayor Giuliani said, you know, we should all be in school, and we're a bunch of -- you know. So the argument returns --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- in the aftermath of the demonstration -- 1199 and Al Sharpton then come out and say, "We're going to Wall" -- you know, they're like, [01:45:00] "We're going to do what you couldn't do. But we're going to do it by getting a permit." And -- which was a -- and we -- there's a whole -- I don't want to belabor this particular -- but -- but, you know, it was a -- it was a sort of demoralizing thing. Because it was a -- and we were completely penned in. It was just listening to more speeches. It was -- there was no element of shutting anything down. There was -- and it was -- and there was a feeling of being routed politically by -- you know, by the Democratic Party, by this --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So.

Amaka: Absolutely.

Christopher: So. So -- and then -- so that's -- that's the exper-- SLAM! was the product of that experience, right. Out of that a bunch of things happened. The next year there was another crummy budget, not as bad. And certainly not as broad in terms of its attacks on other forces. And there's an attempt to revive the CUNY Coalition. And out of that SLAM! -- what -- it's originally called SLAM!-slash-CUNY Coalition the first sort of year of its existence. The first -- it's spring semester. So we go back the next fall. We lick our wounds. We're -- there's -- I

mean, some of it is a -- I think the Mumia -- was Mumia stuff in '95 or -- '94 or -- '95 or '96? There's a lot of Mumia action one summer. I don't know if that's after '95 or '96. But --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So we go back. I get involved in the student newspaper, the Hunter Envoy. There's a sort of -- Jed gets involved in taking over the alternative student newspaper, which was called Spheric, which had been sort of run by this crazed guy. It was -- and so now there were two newspapers on the campus that were very oriented towards building the movement.

Amaka: Yes.

Christopher: They had somewhat different tones. And, you know, one is the official student newspaper, and the -- but -- but contains much more coverage of -- of what's happening on -- at the university, what are the cuts, what are the -- what's the increase in the repression that's going on --

Amaka: This is the fall?

Christopher: This is the fall. There's a -- I think there was a -- there was a fight -- there -- black solidarity day at York College -- it -- yeah.

Amaka: York, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, York, that -- that -- so this had been an ongoing event at York organized by people in the DSU around -- but also, as I said, December 12th was very deep in it. And they had invited Leonard Jeffries, amongst others, to come. Who else?

Amaka: Was that the one that [Khalil?] --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Khalil went on it. And so they'd invited, you know, several controversial speakers. And -- and the CUNY central administration basically canceled the event, you know. And -- I wasn't at the event, but the -- the -- but it was this incredibly repressive move, right. I mean, and this is -- for me, I had gone to -- you know, I had gone to the University of Minnesota. I had gone to this art school. I'd participated in student politics -- in radical student politics in the United States. I had a pretty good knowledge of what -- what kind of political space typically exists on campuses. And here I am at this huge university with a majority student of color population, and it's like all the elementary protections of the Bill of Rights just -- and -- and -- and sort of concepts of academic freedom and what it means to -- all of that --

Amaka: Everything --

Christopher: -- is just out the window.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: It's a completely different atmosphere. It's like -- there's just -- you have to ask for permission to do everything. And [01:50:00] even if you get the permission, the -- you know, the administration will freely shut it down. The administration interferes in student government elections --

Amaka: Wow.

Christopher: -- to prevent -- it was just, the naked -- I mean, some of it was just New York, and it's sort of more rough and tumble than what I was used to in Minneapolis. But some of it was just, like -- no, this is -- you know, this is -- this -- this -- I mean, I think predominantly it was this just -- well, I knew intellectually. But to see the intensity of repression that was directed at students of color versus what I had seen at predominantly white --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- institutions. And -- and so the stuff at York was crazy. They -- they basically shut down the campus to prevent the event from happening. There were confrontations --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- at the -- at -- at the thing. I don't know if you've gotten any of this history from other people.

Amaka: Yeah, I haven't got it from other people, but I think -- I got it from some -- it must probably be from the -- the paper that you wrote. Did you -- yeah.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: You talk about a lot of this in there.

Christopher: Yeah, yeah.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: The repression piece?

Amaka: I feel like I read about that --

Christopher: Yeah. No, I did --

Amaka: -- in your paper.

Christopher: I -- I -- I -- I don't know which pa-- I -- have -- I -- I've sent you all my stuff, I think.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Did I send you the thing about repre-- there was one paper I wrote that was just about repression at CUNY.

Amaka: I don't think I have seen it.

Christopher: OK, I should send you that.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And -- so I probably -- I may have made reference to some of this in some thing -- other things --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But -- and -- and Ron McGuire is very --

Amaka: You said that.

Christopher: -- useful for all of this stuff.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So I'm -- and one of the things that happens is that the head of campus security at York gets fired or pushed out. I think fired. Because -- forced to resign -- because he is -- what time is it? Just so my --

Amaka: It's 12:00.

Christopher: Okay.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So he gets pushed out because he thinks this is stupid, right. He's pushed out by CUNY central administration. So there's this -- CUNY central is like centralizing control of the security apparatus. There's a whole shift that started around '90, taking the individual security forces, turning them into an integrated thing under a centralized command that's not going to be directed by the individual colleges' campuses --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- but by the -- and is -- will, therefore, be used more forcefully against protests. And that's what is essentially its purpose. They -- you know, they justify it in various other ways. But it's -- and there is this whole thing -- they buy, like, something like 400,000 rounds of ammunition or some -- you know, I mean, they're -- you know, some -- I forgot what the exact figure. But you can --

Amaka: Yeah, I feel like I remember seeing a newspaper -- or something in the archive, you know --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- from a newspaper that was talking about that, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah. So I did a lot of writing for the Envoy about these things. And other people were doing them. I was also writing about the Zapatistas and other international stuff and -- so we're creating sort of an infrastructure at Hunter. And -- of -- which is doing -- we're -- Hunter has a rich radical history already. And we're building on that. And -- and then '95 there's -- in the spring of '95 there's this new sort of budget. There's a new pushback. We have demonstrations. We -- we retreat from the no-permit thing. We're like, not this time, and -- you know. And it's much smaller. And it's much weaker. And we had a pretty decent turnout from Hunter. But it isn't part of a thriving thing. And the -- it's in -- in the aftermath of that demonstration, which as at Times Square, I think, we -- I remember a bunch of us went out to eat afterwards. And I -- I, who had always been opposed to any dealings with student government, and I was probably the most hostile person toward student government. And I said, "We should take over the student government." And we -- and -- and a plan was hatched. It was -- and it was like -- you know, I think other -- you know, there were people who had been in student government. There were other people who had different towards it already. And -- but we made this sort of determination. We're like, we can do it. We have -- we are the leadership of the student movement at Hunter. The people in student government are largely irrelevant to that. And --

Amaka: At this point is SLAM! still [01:55:00] -- because, you know, like you said --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- it was SLAM!/CUNY Coalition.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: So are there still SLAM!, you know, chapters, or activity, or collectives in other spaces --

Christopher: Yeah. Yeah, yeah there are a bunch.

Amaka: -- or is it really just -- okay.

Christopher: So there's -- there's SLAM! at City College. There's SLAM! at Brooklyn College. I mean -- there's a falling out with Staten Island when -- one of the things that happens is early in the spring we have -- there's a -- a meeting. And one of the things was there was a real frustration coming out of the '95 experience with -- in particular there is a sort of set of little Trotskyist sects that showed up at every meeting that argued that we should call for a general strike. That argued that we should call for cancelling -- they had a very -- they had a very sort of mechanical idea about what we should do. And they argued the same thing -- there was no flexibility in how they --

it was more radical than a lot of what people in the room were for. I -- I would be delighted if there was a general strike. But it wasn't reality based in terms of where you could move people. We -- we were not in a position to call for a general strike.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: It would make us look clownish if we had.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So it was this kind of mechanical thing. And they were -- they were sort of this irritant. And there was another more -- and they -- some of them were students. In particular, they had a student base at -- at the College of Staten Island and -- you know, and some other places, right. Then -- but then there was a larger problem which -- we had these CUNY-wide meetings, and everybody and their dog would show up.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Right. I mean, now that meant a lot of people from a lot of different campuses. But not necessarily representing things. You know, just anybody who wanted their voice heard. That's fine, except it creates these weird disproportionalities, right. Do the people in the -- in the CUNY Coalition -- citywide CUNY Coalition meetings, or the CUNY, like, coalition meetings -- do they represent actual forces on their respective campuses, or are they just their own little thing?

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and this is always a tension. And on the same level, you don't want to like, just chase people away, because they're their own little thing. But then there were also people who came in and said, "I represent the community," right, you know. Any number of communities, right. And -- and some of them represented real things. But they weren't on cam-- you know. And there was sort -- sort of the -- and then you get in arguments -- well, we want this to be as broad as possible. And we're like -- so there's a tension, right. And -- and then, you know -- hi, I'm from 1199, and I represent, you know, thousands and thousands of members, and the big budget and all these resources. So you have this tension and -- so there's -- afterwards there's a bunch of summation that goes on. And one of the things that we -- that sort of, I think, the crew at Hunter had particularly summed up, was it was critical to form a more lasting, permanent, radical student organization. And -- which is to say -- permanent in the sense that it had a structure that would outlast any particular upsurge. Radical in terms of some of the politics in particular. The sort of political independence from the -- the Dem-- Democratic Party apparatus, which is -- is very powerful in terms of movements in the city. A student -- a genuinely student organization. The idea was -- not that community or labor were unimportant, but that if we were going to enter into coalitions, we had to do so from a position of actually organ-- of representing an organized force of students. And that if we were going to pretend that we were the coalition, well, then students would get -- would get trampled, right. They would -- so we -- so -- so we had a proposal at the outset of the sort of 1995 CUNY Coalition [02:00:00] meetings that end up choosing SLAM!, to create sort of a delegate structure for decision-making. That each campus will have -- the citywide meetings would be delegate meetings. Anyone could attend, but there -- the only people who could vote would be four representatives from each school. And -- and the idea here was, we'll give more representation to smaller schools, schools where the movement isn't as developed, etc. We'll -- some of them probably won't even be able to send four representatives.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But -- but -- but we create a structure that isn't going to be completely dominated by the strongest schools, in which non-students are not going to vote. And in which there's some -- and there's a provision in it that the -- that at least half of the del-- of any delegation has to be women. And at least half has to be people of color, however you make that happen, right. And if you can't make it happen, you don't get -- you know, you just get the delegation of the size that you can make happen. And so there's a sort of -- and part of this is that there's -- we see the -- when the movement's at its height, the participation -- the -- the -- the faces in the room are blacker and browner, right. There's -- there's more -- the -- the composition of the room. When the movement subsides, you have this layer of permanent -- this sort of permanent layer of white radical activists. Or other kinds, but in the case -- given the radicalism of it. There's a layer of people who will -- it's not all white. It's -- but it's a lot whiter. It becomes -- so at the height, in -- in -- in the spring of '95, it's, you know -- it's Sesame Street. It's, you know, it's -- you know, it's a rainbow coalition. The fall, you know, of -- of -- of '95, you go to a CUNY Coalition meeting, and it's -- you know, it's a handful of people of color and a lot of white Trotskyists and white grad students from the grad center. And -- and so we're like -- we got to -- we have to have a sort of structural solution. So that's the -- that's what we come up with. It doesn't actually ever work. But the fight over it basically results in the Trotskyists leaving, for the most part. And -- and which means, in the case of the College of Staten Island, College of Staten Island leaving. In retrospect, I think there was -- I think we underestimated the value of having some of their

craziness in the mix, right. That -- that they were a check against some other conservatising tendencies, you know. But at the time, they were driving us up the wall. And so --

Amaka: How long did that sort of structure last?

Christopher: It --

Amaka: Because I feel like when I talk to people, it -- we start off with this coalition -- or, you know, the delegates. And then it somehow just fades -- you know.

Christopher: It fades immediately. It -- it --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- never functions.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: It -- it -- it -- it -- I mean, I think we maintained the pretense of it for a few meetings, right.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: And -- I mean, it just doesn't work, because the fact that -- the thing is is we come up with a structure in the anticipation of another upsurge. And then the upsurge doesn't happen. And then whoever shows up for the meeting, shows up for the meeting, and then we don't want to tell people they can't vote, since they at least had the decency to show up for the meeting, right.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: You know. You know, we -- and -- and part of it is that there's a requirement that the delegates be selected by their campus group. Well, but they -- sometimes they are the campus --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- group there, or there isn't a campus group, or, you know -- or there is a campus group, but they didn't send anybody. And these other people came, and they're who we have at Queens College, or whatever. So we're not going to say, "You can't vote on what we -- because you're here. They're not. And we need" --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- "to try and make this demonstration happen." And --

Amaka: So does the coalition -- so in response to that, I mean, does -- are you guys consistently meeting -- having these kind of cross-ca-- you know, these meetings with multiple campuses present. Are you guys still having these coalition meetings for -- I mean, I don't know how long --

Christopher: Yeah, so basically -- I mean, this -- the pattern tends to be -- I mean, so in the fall -- fall of '95, kind of the CUNY Coalition disperses. And there's some -- there are a few -- there may be a couple of mee-- two or three sort of [02:05:00] ersatz meetings that get some people at them. And then it regroups. In like late January -- the governor releases his budget in mid-January. There's a -- you know, there's a sort of -- NYPIRG's gears start moving. And -- and then we have a -- so we -- we have a meeting. And then it's basically weekly meetings throughout the spring, weekly CUNY-wide meetings. And then whatever's happening on the individual campuses, depending on how they function. So we're having -- at -- at Hunter, which is sort of -- becomes the center of -- of the CUNY Coalition -- of SLAM! in -- in '95 -- it's -- it's the strongest of several relatively strong groups. So there's a strong group at City College. There's a strong group at Brooklyn College. There's some weaker groups at a number of other places. And -- and that's the backbone of the demonstrations that happened at -- you know, there are a couple of demonstrations. But there's sort of one big one thing that -- you know, it's big as what had happened the year before. And it's -- and that pattern will reproduce itself. Whenever there is -- there -- you know, you get weekly -- more or less weekly CUNY-wide meetings typically in the spring when there's a, you know, reason to have them. And then -- and then they fizzle out in the fall. And then they -- if -- if -- if there's another outrageous budget or attack, which there isn't always, they -- you know, it revives it. So part of what happens is -- so Hunter comes -- we come out of it controlling the student government.

Amaka: Yes.

Christopher: We run a campaign. And it's a very, you know -- it -- it's a good campaign. We run our -- you know, and we just completely trounce the old -- and part of what we do is we -- we take the president from the old student government, who has antagonized the student government and has come around us -- Michelle Gonzalez is her name. And she's -- she's not particularly good politically, actually. But she makes the idea of running for student government seem more attractive, because we have someone who's willing to be president. Because we don't really have anybody in our ranks -- we -- the core are basically suspicious of student government, and suspicious that it will suck us. We want the resources. We don't want the responsibilities of running a bureaucracy with that.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: She's already nominally running the bureaucracy. So we -- she's at the head of our ticket. But the whole rest of our ticket is activists. And it's an activist core. And -- and she tells us -- this, I forgot -- she tells us

she's -- that she's a member of the Young Communist League, the -- the Communist Party youth group. We're like, that kind of figures. They're kind of student government-y. You know, they're like -- and we get -- we win. And we win overwhelmingly. And then -- I forgot what precipitates it. But she becomes really impossible to work with. And so we're -- we end up impeaching her very quickly. Like, within a month of the election. And the charge was that she had lied about being a communist. She had said she was a communist when she wasn't. So -- which I thought was delicious. I was like -- that we're going to impeach you for not being a communist. And -- because she wasn't. She had -- she had misrepresented herself. And -- and there -- she -- basically it just became clear that she was playing all sorts of weird games. And -- I -- and I don't remember all the particulars. But the result -- end result was now we had to run the student government, right. We had -- now we couldn't just count on Michelle to somehow magically make it all happen. We would just use the money for buses to -- or whatever. I think -- I think we were somewhat naive in terms of the headaches that running student government involved. Some of us were. And so -- that -- so we -- so at the end of spring of '95 we've been elected to the student government. And we -- we entered the student government in the summer. And -- and the -- SLAM! CUNY Coalition has -- has now become SLAM!.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Right. [02:10:00] The CUNY Coalition thing gets dropped.

Amaka: Structurally, how -- it's very interesting in regards to SLAM! being in student government at Hunter, but then also kind of have -- you know, there are folks that are involved with SLAM! that are not -- that do not occupy student government --

Christopher: Right.

Amaka: -- positions. So structurally, like, how does that -- are there people that -- I guess I'm just trying to figure out. The president of student government, you know, on the SLAM! slate is not necessarily -- because you guys aren't --

Christopher: Right.

Amaka: -- running it in terms of that sort of structure in regards to the rest of the membership?

Christopher: Right. It's a -- it's a complicated kind of mess, is what it is. And it goes through several iterations. I mean, part of it is -- so we run a slate. And there are -- there -- there's an executive board. There's a president and an executive board --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- which consists of various officers. And then there's a senate, student senate, which consists of four representatives of each class of the sophomores, fresh-- freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. And what we basically do is we put core SLAM! people in all or most of the executive positions. And then we put allied club leaders in all of -- in the senate positions.

Amaka: Okay. Okay.

Christopher: That's the rough dynamic in terms of the slate. At -- but then it gets messy, because people ran on the SLAM! slate. They think of themselves as SLAM!. We want to recruit people into SLAM!. We want people to commit to SLAM!. And the boundaries between SLAM! and student government are constantly getting fudged. Right? And part of it is deliberate. Like, we -- now everything says SLAM!/USG. All the --

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: -- Hunter-SLAM! literature says that. Because it enables us to use the fact that we're student government to, you know, get rooms, to get space. And we have all sorts of access to things under the name of student government. And we're just -- and we brand it all with SLAM!. You know, so -- but that contributes to confusion about where one --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- ends and the other begins. And we're not very good at dealing with that. So our first year in office from '95 to '96, we're involved in a whole bunch of -- is that when the Million Man March is? I think -- is the Million Man March in the fall of -- '95, I --

Amaka: Ninety-five.

Christopher: I mean, '96, '96.

Amaka: I think it was -- yeah.

Christopher: Ninety-six, yeah. So -- so some people participate in that. There's an immigrant rights march on Washington. We send buses down to that. Oh, one of the things we do is we hire Kai. This is a huge --

Amaka: Yeah, so how does -- yeah.

Christopher: So -- so part of it is, we had Michelle as president. And John Kim was the -- was the office manager. And then we replace -- we impeach Michelle, and we bring in Rachel. Rachel is now president. John

Kim is office manager. John Kim has many talents. Managing an office is not one of them. I mean, he's a -- he's an incredible artist, I mean, first and foremost.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And he's a great recruiter. I mean, he -- you know. I'm a very good recruiter. Or I was. I don't know if I am anymore. But I was in my younger days. John Kim is a very -- an excellent recruiter. He was constantly bringing people into the organization. He was -- and he understood the just critical nature of that work, and just made it happen all of the time. And -- so -- so many people who came into SLAM! were recruited by -- by John Kim. But -- I'm -- I'm willing to be the hatchet man. I'm willing to do the dirty business, sometimes, that needed to be done. And so I had to tell John that he could not be office manager anymore. Because -- because he's an artist. He's not -- he -- he's a --

Amaka: I know John.

Christopher: You know John.

Amaka: He's -- yeah. (laughs)

Christopher: He's not a -- he's -- that's not what he's -- he's got other talents.

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: So -- you know, he and I clash a lot, but I -- I'm very fond of him. And -- and [02:15:00] -- so but this was one of those moments. We need to get a new office manager. And I knew Kai from political prisoner stuff. Not well, but she was, you know -- she was kind of -- she was doing political prisoner stuff. She was -- she had a -- she had been working for Paper Tiger TV. And she's sort of part of this sort of non-profit lefty -- radical non-profit world. And -- and she was close to the anarchist scene. She was -- you know, Ashanti Alston?

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Yeah. So -- and they -- they lived here, in this building.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: Yeah. So --

Amaka: Everybody's been in this building.

Christopher: Yeah, so -- yeah. So they lived in the same apartment -- they sold their apartment to Kamau.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: Okay. So -- so they -- so she -- I -- I ran into her at Blackout Books, which was the anarchist bookstore on the Lower East Side. And she was working on a resume, because she had -- I don't know. She quit or -- she -- she was no longer working at -- at Paper Tiger. And I was like --

Amaka: You need a job?

Christopher: "I've got a job that you might be interested in." And she seemed -- I mean, because was perfect in so many ways for -- I mean, I -- I mean, we would clash, too. I clash with lots of people. But the -- but she's charismatic. She's radical. She's revolutionary. She's -- she had roots in and a knowledge of the history that, you know -- this is a weakness of student stuff [internally? inherently?]. And so she has so many things going for her. She knew this -- she -- she run an operation, an organization, or -- you know. She had a lot going for her. So we hired her. And -- you know. And I was on the hiring committee. And I -- I -- I enc-- you know, we didn't -- I don't know how many app-- we didn't get many applications. But -- but it was clear. I mean, it was like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- you look at it, it was just -- everyone agreed instantly. And it -- and she had a huge effect on the organization. She -- I mean, part of the thing is there's this dynamic, which was, I was a somewhat older -- I was one of the older mem-- I was probably the oldest member of -- of SLAM!. I was definitely the most experienced. I was not shy about sharing my opinions, and neither was Jed. So you had two -- and -- and Jed, while younger than I, was very versed politically. He was very well read. And so you had these two loudmouthed -- I mean, that's what we are. I mean, we are what we are. It's important to know what you are. So we're two loudmouthed white guys in a predominantly women of color organization. It's problematic. That creates -- and, you know -- and there are a lot of talented people. I don't want to minimize -- I mean, there are a lot of people who bring a lot to the table. And -- and it's a very -- it's a very good mix of people in terms of all of the different talents that people --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But there is a certain lopsidedness here. And so you -- you will, you know, run -- one of the things that SLAM! gets attacked for -- one of the ways people attack SLAM! is that Chris and Jed, you know -- and that -- and -- and -- which is very insulting to, you know, to all these other people at Hunter in particular. Because it wasn't true. It wasn't actually -- but it was -- there was enough truth in it that -- and -- that people could believe that that was the essence of it and not --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- an aspect of it, right. And it isn't -- so Kai was very good in terms of altering that dynamic, right. Because we weren't going to boss her -- I mean, not that we would try.

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: But that she wouldn't let us, right. It was just -- it was a total -- it was a more -- and -- and she came in. She had a whole sort of repertoire of sort of popular education techniques. She -- she just took to it like a fish to water. She just -- she was excited to be surrounded by -- instead of, like, surrounded by the nonprofit world. She was now surrounded by, [02:20:00] like, mainly -- not main -- a lot of women of color. Young people, energetic people, radical people. It was perfect for her. She was perfect for us. And it created a very -- so it -- and so she did a lot to raise the level of political education. And so there are a lot of people who come into the organization, right, who, you know -- so there are people who have leadership roles within the organization and who played important roles in terms of people's political education. I was one of those people. Jed left shortly after this point.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: He -- he -- John Kim did this. Kai did this. And other people grew into that -- those roles. But -- but -- but, you know, we were probably the people who had the most political training and the most sort of temperamental inclination to train others, right, you know. And -- you know, Rachel's highly competent. Sandra, like, became, you know -- went from, you know -- she -- she -- she became an incredible organizer. There are a number of people. So -- but so there was this -- this -- flow. And so -- so in the '96 to '97 year -- oh. I went to Mexico for a month in -- in the summer of '95. I spent a month, like -- yeah. I spent a month in Mexico City. I -- I went there basically because I wanted to learn Spanish. I was -- I had taken inten-- I had taken intensive Spanish classes at Hunter and had whatever I could get out of that. And I spent a month with the Love and Rage collective in Mexico City, who were very involved in Zapatista stuff. And -- and the -- the organization had not completely transferred itself to Chiapas, which it would eventually --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- more or less do. But so I spent the -- a month there. I met my wife-to-be through this. Jed -- her -- it was Jed's roommate.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: Jessica. So -- so -- and -- and then -- so the '95, '96 school year, we did a lot of sort of not campus-specific issue stuff. We did stuff around Mumia. We did stuff around immigrant rights. We did a lot of just sort of -- a lot of police brutality stuff. And so -- and part of this was just a reflection of the reality that the campus -- the campus issues --

Amaka: Were the -- yeah.

Christopher: -- were -- were subsiding. And there wasn't a big attack coming down at that particular moment. And -- and part of it was, I think, Kai -- I mean, Kai was never particularly excited about the tuition hike stuff and the remediation stuff. There were certain issues that did not, like, grab her. She was more interested in figuring out how to plug these younger people --

Amaka: Into --

Christopher: -- into this broader community things.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So this is always a tension. And I -- I always thought both were -- I -- I -- I thought you -- you needed the -- the -- the broader off-campus issues to deepen people's politics.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: But that you needed the on-campus stuff to develop a real mass -- that if you wanted to move thousands of people on the camp-- you know, be where you are. If you're on a campus, you're on a campus. And you -- you have a responsibility to try and figure out how to organize this population. If you want to -- you know, if you want to go into Bed-Stuy and organize Bed-Stuy, go into Bed-Stuy --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- and organize Bed-Stuy.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But don't try and do it from Hunter College.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: Right? It's sort of -- so if you're at Hunter College, you need to figure out a way to relate to the people at Hunter College. And that was my view.

Amaka: So you guys at all times were kind of plugged into -- I mean, because you had both, you know -- I mean, which you have the attacks on remediation, [02:25:00] on the admissions, and tuition hikes, and ID cards, and -- you know, those sorts of things.

Christopher: Right.

Amaka: And then you have the, you know, Mumia. You have Diallo. You know, the police brutality stuff.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Whatever else. So from the beginning, it was always -- you guys were always plugged into --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- the multiple --

Christopher: Yeah. I mean, I would say -- I mean, the thing is is the CUNY Coalition in '95 was in some ways a single-issue --

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: -- coalition. And one of the other things we did when we -- when we came back in '96 and formed -- formed into SLAM!, we -- we handed -- hand-- we -- we adopted a 10-point program. I don't know -- so.

Amaka: I've seen it, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah. So -- so I was the author of the original draft of that. And -- we modified it a little. But -- but the idea was -- it was constructed to make those connections. To say, "We are a student movement. We are fighting for the rights of people to go to school and the conditions necessary for them to do so." And then we elaborate what those conditions are. And they, of course, involve the entire transformation of the society, right.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: You know. So -- so that creates sort of a -- that's kind of the framework through which we sort of legitimize taking up all these non-campus specific issues, is that this is part of the fight for the conditions necessary, part of building the alliances, and etc., you know. So it's -- the -- the -- I think the -- the -- the 10-point program sort of lays out that pretty well. And so what hap-- so that's what we do for that year. I mean, we do a lot of that sort of stuff. And other people will probably be able to fill in --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: It becomes a blur for me, some of that.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: When this thing happened, and when that thing happened. There was --

Amaka: Well, I have another -- I mean, this is not specific --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- to that year. And -- and it sort of -- it goes back to the, in some ways, the dominance question and the kind of messiness of that. How were decisions made? Because I know the e-board wasn't necessarily making all -- you know, in terms -- that's how student government is structured.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: But that's not how you guys are making decisions on a day-to-day basis.

Christopher: Yeah, well, that's kind -- I mean -- I -- one thing is I have to complicate the story a bit. One -- so the first year, right, the e-board and SLAM! and the sort of core leadership of SLAM! overlap --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- almost entirely.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Right. Enough that that's not actually a problem. And then -- and furthermore, we have all of these e-board respon-- we have all these responsibilities. So in fact, we do end up --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- making decisions through the e-board, right. Episodically, we have these separate meetings.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Right, when it's felt that that's necessary and this is becoming a problem. And so there's a sort of back and forth on it. But the sort of -- the -- I think the logic of the situation drags us into the e-board becoming the de facto leadership body of SLAM!. That has problems. Because the e-board gets selected in -- according to certain criteria, people's willingness to do the e-board specific functions. So there are people who are, like, still, like -- I love SLAM!, but I don't want to do student government work. And so those people don't end up on the e-board. And there's -- you know. There's complicated things. And then people who end up getting included on the e-board who may be sort of relatively marginal to things, but were important to include for various reasons. And then so-and-so leaves the e-board, and we recruit someone out of the senate.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And there's -- so it's a kind of funky dynamic. And some of it I can't comment on, because I leave in the -- in -- basically in the summer of -- of '97. No, summer of '95, I went to Mexico. The summer of '96 Jessica, my -- my partner, and I go down to Chiapas for this intercontinental encuentro, which is this big international gathering organized by the Zapatistas in Zapatistan villages in Chiapas. And so we go down there. And [02:30:00] -- and while we're there we are -- we meet up with our Mexican friends -- our friends from Mexico

City. And they have -- they have initiated a project where they're -- they're basically all moving into a Zapatista village. This is -- ends up being cray-cray. But -- but be that as it may, they have big plans. They're going to -- they're going to help run a school. They're going to start a clinic. And they ask Jessica and I if we would be willing to move down to Chiapas and to live in the city of San Cristobal, which is sort of the colonial capital in -- it's not the capital anymore of the state. But it's sort of the big city in the eastern half of the state where the Zapatistas are at their strongest. And basically set up a house that would serve as a stopping-off point for people, money, material, aid that would be going to this project in this village. We said yeah. So -- so that was the summer of '96.

Amaka: So how long were you guys there? Just the entire summer, or are you there for longer?

Christopher: We -- that was -- '96 we go down there. That's like -- that was like a week and a half.

Amaka: Oh, okay. The conference.

Christopher: Yeah. And then we take a long trip up to San Diego, because the -- the Republican National Convention is in San Diego. And then we schlep to Chicago, where the Democratic National Convention is. So we spent our summer sort of doing this crazy tour. But we come back fall of '96. So -- the '96, '97 school year is as I described it. Sort of a lot of different issues. And then in the summer of '97, Jessica and I move to Mexico. And that's where we live for the next two years.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So this is an important part of the history of SLAM! that I am not --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- a direct observer on.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So I -- I'm aware of the sort of general contours of things. I -- I -- sort of keeping track of what's happening. But I can't give an intimate detail -- I can tell you about when I come back.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: I -- I -- a lot of things have changed, right. And one of the things that's changed is the identification of the organization as a women of color-led organization. We had made this initial decision in the structure of the CUNY-wide SLAM!, that it would have this character. That it would be majority women and majority people of color in the leading body. That actual structure does not get implemented. But the idea sort of lives on. And sometime in this period becomes sort of part of the official ideology of SLAM!, right. This is -- or the identity of SLAM!. SLAM! is a women of color-led organization. And a lot of this, I think, is Kai is very systematically cultivating women of color --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- leaders. And building this cohort. I mean, and there's a cohort to be built. There's a -- it's a rich -- and so that's sort of -- so I come back to a situation which is -- it's a just -- it's a different organization. Jed's gone. And -- and, you know, all of the women who were, you know -- I mean, like, Rachel, Lenina, Sandra, they're radical activists who, you know, acquitted themselves with considerable skill in '95. But by -- when I come back in -- in '99, they've -- they've all undergone a transformation in terms of their capacities. And -- and a number of others, you know --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- that are not -- that are -- and --

Amaka: Is it still like the same core of people in '99? Or you have new people --

Christopher: There's new -- there are a lot -- like, Sasa Garcia comes in. And --

Amaka: [Inoa?].

Christopher: Inoa.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And then Stephanie Compos and -- there's a whole lot of new people. [02:35:00] There are a whole lot of people who were not there when I left who are there when I -- and then there are other people who -- you know, still hanging around, you know. There's a core and a periphery at all times. And so -- so yeah. So -- so the dynamics of the organization are very -- very different. And our -- I -- I had been on the e-board when -- for the first election. I was -- and -- the -- for the first year. I was -- I forgot what the title was. But my responsibility was -- I -- inter-university. I was supposed to relate to other campuses.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Which meant I was a delegate to the university student senate. And -- which I despised. It was just a -- it was -- it just sort of -- it was a swamp of the kind of worst aspiring politician-types in -- in -- and -- and then there were always some good people.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: There are always some good people in the mix who were -- you know, it was a terrible place for them to be, right. It was like -- I -- I would go to USS meetings and my sole purpose would be to find the good people and try to --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- rescue them and bring --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- bring them into real -- so -- real activism. And -- so -- so I came back and -- and I needed a job. And I went to SLAM!. I said, "Is there a job for me?" And they said yeah. So I got hired on, originally as a project coordinator. And I -- I came back -- I came back in the late spring of '99. I got -- I got hired -- so we had sort of -- SLAM! had this staff. I mean, part of what happens -- I mean, one of the things is we had this big budget. And previous student governments -- I mean, it was a budget -- I forgot what it was. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, right. It was a budget that was a real temptation --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- for corruption. And in previous incarnations, the student government had -- had done all sorts of crazy things, including buying a townhouse and -- you know. Crazy and, like, illegally, you know.

Amaka: Wow.

Christopher: So there was all sorts of shenanigans that had gone on previously. Our approach was to use -- use the money to hire staff. Hire staff to do the bureaucratic work that we didn't want to do. Hire staff to work as full-permanent -- as full-time organizers. So those were the project coordinators. So we had -- that was our sort of solution to it.

Amaka: So you weren't a student at this point. You were just a staff -- you were --

Christopher: No, I was -- I returned as a student.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Christopher: In fact -- and in fact, there was a limitation on how -- on how much we could spend on non-student --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- salaries. And -- and though there were some people who pushed to get rid of that, I was always in favor of that and thought we should --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So -- so no. I was a student. I -- I -- so when I ret-- so I -- I -- you know, I left school for two years, right, to go to Mexico and -- and I did a bunch of very interesting things in Mexico which would become the -- will eventually lead to my dissertation. But -- but -- so I come back. I haven't graduated yet. You know, my great plan to go back to school and graduate has not borne fruit. And I -- so I go back. I -- I re-enroll, but I'm also -- I get a job. You know, I still need to work. And so I get a job as project coordinator. And then a sort of scandal blows up, which is that the -- there was this thing called the student resource center, which had -- at a certain point, well prior to SLAM!, there had been an evening student government and a day student government. And somebody had engineered their unification, actually in the context of a previous movement upsurge. And it was a good thing. Because there was a sort of weirdness to this division between night students --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- and day students. And -- and the way in which that divided -- and the night students tended to be more progressive. They were older --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- and more radical. And so the -- part of what happened was the student government was unified. And -- but in order to sort of make that happen, the unified student government took over the offices of the [02:40:00] undergrad -- of the day student government. And the offices of the nighttime student government became the student resource center, which was supposed to be, like, computer labs, tutoring. It was kind of very vaguely defined sort of services. And it was basically a money pot. It was its own -- it had its own budget. And it had been sort of a -- yeah. It was a little pot of money that people had used over the years, similar to -- so when we -- when SLAM! had come to power, we had kind of left the people who were running the student resource center in charge. We just didn't bother them.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: We let them run it, continue to run it. But the summer I came back it became apparent that there was a lot of, like, financial malfeasance going on there. And -- and so we had the power to remove the director of the student resource center. We removed him. And I replaced him. And the -- the student resource center then became a very different -- so what we did was we basically -- the student resource center became the movement space. And student government offices were the student government offices.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Now, in reality, they were both movement spaces.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: And the student government offices were always movement spaces as well. But now we had a space that was sort of much more dedicated. We set up a -- a -- a functioning computer lab. But that was not -- it -- we weren't just trying to provide another computer lab on campus. We wanted computers. We -- we had a need for computers, and this was the way to do it. We turned -- we had a lounge that we used as a space for events. So we would -- we could circumvent the -- normally, we would have to register rooms. We would have to go -- and -- and this was a way for the administration to know all the stuff we were doing. Now we were organizing events. We had our own room, and we just organized events. And -- and -- and the -- and the administration every -- every month or so would, like, say, "You can't do that." And we'd say, "OK, we won't." And then we just kept doing it, right. There -- and -- you know, it was -- you know, better to seek forgiveness than to ask permission. And so -- and -- and then we -- we leased some large volume photocopiers, so we could produce, you know, 10,000 leaflets at the drop of a hat. It was -- so we had this -- and we painted it all up nice. And it looked nice. And it was -- it was a welcoming space. And it became a very vibrant part of -- of -- up to that point, it had had all the sort of charm of the DMV, you know. It was like -- it was --

Amaka: Right. Everyone talks very fondly of the student resource center, and it being this -- you know, really becoming a hub for -- not even just movement work in regards to Hunter, but other people from off-campus.

Christopher: Yeah. So -- yeah, so -- I -- you know -- so I was the director of the student resource center for basically from '99 to the end of the summer of 2003. So summer of 2000 to 2003. And, yeah, it was great. It was -- it was a -- and that was -- I mean, that was a deliberate piece of it, was we -- so off-campus groups just called us all the time to reserve space and had meetings in our space. And -- and -- and this did a lot to strengthen our relations. And it was in some ways a more -- more organic way of relating to community-based stuff than trying to project ourselves out as community organizers. Though there was still a lot of people that didn't lose conception of that.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Continued to -- and -- and the student resource center had its own staff, right. And we -- we kept a couple of the old staff. We -- there was -- the computer guys who were technically competent, and they had not stolen money or -- you know, as far as we could tell. You know, probably -- undoubtedly turned a blind eye to the stealing of money. But -- but when your boss is the one stealing money, that's often the case, right. So -- so they were happy to work -- they seemed happy to work in a place that was now -- had some vitality and some regular hours, and -- you know. And yeah. So the student resource center became a -- a really good thing. So --

Amaka: So when you come back, is the -- had remediation [02:45:00] already been eliminated? Or it was still kind of on the table? This is what, '99?

Christopher: Yeah, it was '99.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So yeah. I think remediation --

Amaka: Already --

Christopher: -- had been eliminated. Or they had voted to eliminate remediation, but they had failed to give -- I believe they had failed to give the proper -- to have the proper hearings. There was a court decision that --

Amaka: There was like a year that -- yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, yeah. So I may be wrong about this. But I think I came back in between those. But -- so yes. So there continued to be -- so we continued to do stuff around remediation when I came back. And that was a big thing. But it -- there was -- it was pretty clear --

Amaka: That it would --

Christopher: -- that we would -- that was a defeat.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: That the vote was in, and it was just -- yes, we had sort of one -- I -- I -- a one-year delay. But -- and so we went in -- I'm not saying we went through the motions. We really try to motivate people. And we did have demonstrations. And -- but -- but it didn't have any -- it didn't have the same intensity that it had the previous year. Which I -- I wasn't there. I -- so. I -- I was in Chiapas. One aside, which might be relevant in terms of sort of the charting of the SLAM! stuff is -- so my main stuff in Chiapas, Jessica and I are -- were involved in -- that whole move into a Zapatista village thing that blew up right before we moved to Chiapas.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So we show up, and we're like, "We're here, but the thing we're here for is not." And -- and so we -- the -- the Zapatistas had just designated this NGO as their sort of gateway. We went to them, and we said,

“What do you want from us? Or what do the Zapatistas want from us?” And after some waiting, they said they wanted a clinic. They -- but not in that village, but in another village. And we said, “We can do that. We’ll -- I mean, we’ll do our best. We can -- we have some access to some -- some resources. And we’ll see what we can do. We’ll help you -- we’ll -- we’ll assist in the” -- so that was the main thing we -- I did for two years, was building a -- a medical clinic in a Zapatista community. Or assisting in -- in getting -- getting the resources there, and assisting with some of the technical stuff. We did the wiring and the plumbing, things like that. Not that I’m an electrician or my wife’s a plumber, but we -- but, you know, we were college-educated people who could read manuals.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And, you know, the -- it’s amazing what you can do with that if you can -- if you don’t have that. And so -- and we had a lot of friends who had those skills, who were doing those -- that kind of stuff in other villages. And so who were far more competent than we were. So -- but -- so we went down -- but sort of what was for us kind of a side project was, there were several people there -- down there, who had -- who -- who were trying to set up a project called Estación Libre. I don’t know if you’ve heard about this. But -- so Estación Libre was -- the Zapatistas had had a -- encuentro of the Americas or something. They had had something where a bunch of Chicano activists had gone down to -- and -- and some other -- some other act-- assorted activists from the US and Mexico had gone for an extended sort of smaller-scale encuentro meeting, gathering, in -- in one of the villages in -- one of the Zapatista villages. And I think there was a sort of major cultural component to it. But out of that, a group of people had started meeting with the desire to set up a space that would -- similar to what we were suppose to have done -- would be a space in the city of San Cristobal that would serve for people of color who wanted to do solidarity with the Zapatistas to come down and -- and have as pace from which they could do that. And delegations could be organized and so on. There was some sort of fuzziness about the conception of it. And it started out as a mix of -- of people from the US and Mexicans. The people -- some of the people from the US had a very clear vision of this as a vehicle for activists of color to be able to plug into what was a very sort of white-dominated [02:50:00] solidarity scene. They were like, “We need to have our own space here.” Because there were all these people coming from all over the world, but -- but in particular from the US, to Chiapas. Going out visiting, going on delegations, and all this. But it was a very white-dominated thing. And so they had this conception of -- of -- of this space. Not everyone in their group shared that conception. Not all the -- it was a group of people of color, but there were -- some of the people of color from the US did not have those politics.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: The -- it -- one black guy who was -- he -- he -- I -- you know, he might as well have been a tourist. He just happened through, right. And he just fell into this thing. But his politics were very liberal to the degree he had politics at all. And so -- but he’s in this sort of thing. And they had this -- they have a very -- there were two guys who have a very -- and then the Mexicans are, like, befuddled by American race -- US race politics, as --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: As most of the rest of the world is.

Amaka: Yeah, right.

Christopher: Right? Which is perfectly normal, since they’re utterly pathological, right. They’re -- it’s -- it is what it is. And -- and so -- but the -- so -- so they had this collective that was sort of falling apart. And there were two guys, Carl and Miguel. Carl is half-Indian, half-Japanese. And Miguel is Chicano. And -- and they had a vision of what they wanted to do. And we thought it was a really good one. And so we ended out helped -- we spent a lot of time helping them get -- hook up with a 501(c)(3), helping them put together a board, putting together an application -- you know, an application process, and all of -- sort of -- and then they put out a solicitation for -- for people to come down for their first delegation.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And -- so several SLAM! people would participate in that and subsequent -- so Sasa came down, who I did not know until this point. I -- I don’t think I’d met her yet. Kazembe came down, who I had known previously. And -- did [Anna Ortega?] come down on that one? I’m trying to remember. And then there were a bunch of other people. I don’t remember exactly who came down to that one. Then -- because there would be subsequent ones.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So -- but we were sort of the sort of -- the silent partners in this -- this thing. Because, you know -- because it was supposed to be a people of color space. Jed came down uninvited. And was shocked and appalled when he was told that he was not welcome. (laughs) So -- much love for Jed. But -- so. So -- so people -- people who knew Jed will cut him -- tend to cut him a wide -- wide berth. Whereas those who don’t are less than --

Amaka: So this is between ’97 and ’99?

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: There was a few trips? Or was it just the one?

Christopher: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So -- yeah. So Ashanti Alston got very involved in it. And -- yeah, so there were -- so one of the things that happened was that a sort of -- a strong connection got developed between SLAM! and the Zapatistas. There was -- also in '99 there was a student strike at the -- at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City. And so SLAM! sent a delegation down to -- to support the students there. So there was this whole sort of international thing. We sent people to Iraq, you know. It's -- we -- so -- we would use our money to do this stuff. And -- and -- and it was great. So it produced this intensely internationalist vibe to everything. You know, because people brought this -- they would bring it into whatever struggles we were involved in. And they were referencing it and popularizing it. And it was --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So -- so that was a -- I think a very important piece of what made SLAM! work. I mean, the -- the sort of internationalism that was in some sense reflected by the composition of the organization itself was also reflected in the fact that we were [02:55:00] developing ties to movements internationally. Not -- not -- not just sort of acts of solidarity, but sending people. Young people were going there, learning about them, and identifying with them in a fairly intense way. So yeah. So -- so they -- so the first delegation came down while I was there. Why am I drawing a blank on his name? Puerto Rican guy. He was a student in Puerto Rico. He came -- I forgot his name. I forgot his name.

Amaka: That's okay. If you remember --

Christopher: Yeah. But anyhow --

Amaka: -- you can send it to me.

Christopher: So he was one of the -- he -- he was -- also came down, I think, on this first delegation. And -- and yeah. So -- yeah, so.

Amaka: Okay. So --

Christopher: Is this going on longer than you --

Amaka: It's okay. I mean, what is your -- I mean --

Christopher: I -- what time is it?

Amaka: It's probably -- oh, it's one o'clock. Well, okay.

Christopher: It's -- I mean, I don't mind. I have at -- you know, at -- at -- at 2:15 I got to go pick up my son, so.

Amaka: Okay. I'll try to wind it down.

Christopher: Yeah, so.

Amaka: Okay. So in regards to -- so -- so can you talk about kind of the -- we'll skip ahead. The -- like the end of SLAM!. So --

Christopher: Right.

Amaka: We have SLAM! losing student government. I've heard people talk about -- there were conversations around -- brief conversations, I guess, around, like, SLAM! A and SLAM! B.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: So, like, possibly doing, you know --

Christopher: Dividing the organization.

Amaka: Right. So I mean, can you kind of talk about --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- like, those last kind of --

Christopher: Yeah. So -- okay. So, yeah, so we -- I come back in '99. Ninety-nine, 2000. Then -- and --yeah. So there's some kind of developing tensions and contradictions within the organization. And part of it is that this -- in part this tension between the orientation towards students and student issues versus the off-campus stuff. And I think -- you know, in my view, Kai had sort of bent the stick too far --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- off campus. And we were alienating ourselves from the student body. The other thing is that with the elimination of remediation, the composition of the student body began to change, right. I mean, it didn't happen overnight.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: But -- but incoming students were whiter -- who were more white, more likely to be white and Asian. Black students were less likely to be African American. They were more likely to be African, and their numbers were shrinking. The compo-- the -- the class character of the student body was undergoing a transformation. And -- and for some people, that was just all the more reason to get off campus, right. It was, OK, well, that -- this is not the campus where we -- this is not the student body we had committed to fighting for.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: We lost that battle. We're getting older. We're thinking about what we're going to do after college, da da da da da. And this is a natural tendency in, I think, student activism always. People get radicalized on campus. They come -- they begin to think about their life off campus. They begin to view -- they -- they realize the limitations of the power of students to change things. So they start to think about sort of larger --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: -- sections of the populace, of comm-- of different communities, class base, whatever. They -- so this is sort of, I think, inherent in -- in -- in student politics, that you get this contradiction. And I think it was exacerbated in some senses by -- one, Kai in particular had a vision that she argued for, and I think persuaded a lot of people of, which was basically sort of, "Let's use these resources while we can" --

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Christopher: -- "to make things happen off campus." I came back, and I sort of staked out a different view. I said -- I said, "We should radicalize this student body. Whatever this student body is, we should radicalize it as best we can. And we should -- you know, we have a responsibility to do so. We have much more influence." -- [To daughter] hey, sweetie. How are you?

F1: Hi.

Amaka: Hi.

Christopher: How are you?

F1: Good.

Christopher: You're still wearing your jammies? [03:00:00]

F1: Yes. I'm not taking them off.

Christopher: You're just going to wear your jammies all day?

F1: Yes.

Christopher: You're -- you're entitled. Do you want to make some ramen or something?

F1: Actually, I was just about to ask you to help me get the ramen down from the thing.

Christopher: You can pull up the chair. Can you do it with the chair?

F1: I guess so.

Christopher: So the -- so I had -- yeah.

Amaka: I've also heard that -- and this is --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- not exactly '99, but in regards to the decline also the -- being post-9/11 --

Christopher: That's the -- that accelerates things, right. So -- yeah. So there were -- part of it is this sort of -- I think the SLAM! A, SLAM! B stuff is beginning to happen in early 2001. I'm not sure exactly. I -- I -- I -- I need to reconstruct. But -- but -- but the tensions that it comes out of are -- you know, go back further, right. There sort of inherent in the situation, that kind of going from [right to wrong?] -- and part of it is that we lost the -- we lost the remediation fight. And there isn't a new -- a clear new on-campus fight, right.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and I sort of make the argument, "Look, there's never not a fight. We can find a fight if we want to fight, you know. There's plenty of rotten things happening in this institution, as there are in every other institution in this society." And we just -- and -- and so at the time, there was a big anti-sweatshop movement. There was a movement around the (inaudible) workers. And -- and -- and so we had cafeterias, you know, where you could -- but -- there were quite -- there were points of possible -- we could turn this -- and I -- and I -- I said, "Or we could do an investigation into military connections or military contracts." The geography department was deep in GIS funding for the defense department, you know. "So we could investigate, and we could make a campaign around -- around something if we -- if we chose to." And -- and so this ends up becoming the sort of SLAM! A, SLAM! B, right. Because the -- there is a constant flow of younger students coming for whom doing something on campus makes the most sense.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And it resonates. And then there's this old -- largely older group of students -- I mean, older relative to the younger ones at least, that are -- you know, have been involved in Mumia stuff, have been involved in police brutality stuff, want to figure out a way to stay toge-- I mean, part of it is, to move off campus -- there's an idea that -- of forming a nonprofit, an off-campus nonprofit that will somehow get us an independence from the student government structure. Which I always thought was naive. I thought -- I thought that we're just going to be one of many lefty nonprofits competing for foundation money. We're not -- once we're off campus, we lose what's special. And frankly, I think we're going to disperse. I -- I think the -- the -- the -- the -- what our actual political base -- there -- there's a lot of political diversity within the group in terms of what people think, and what they --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- actually think versus what they say they think --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- and things like that. And so when people move off campus, the -- people can be -- it's very easy to be radical on campus in a way that's a lot harder when you move off campus. And -- and so there are some people who are going to stay really radical. And then there are a lot of people who I -- I just figured were not. You know, it was -- and so I -- I thought, stay on campus as long as we possibly can. And so this is how sort of SLAM! A and SLAM! B gets conceived. And -- I forget which is which. But I think SLAM! A is the on-campus --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And SLAM! B is off-campus.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and -- and the student resource center, in some ways, becomes sort of the center for SLAM! A. And we start developing sort of deliberate political education programs aimed at the student body. We're trying to develop this idea of, like, find a campaign.

Amaka: There's also like the high school -- I mean, it was like --

Christopher: Yeah, the high --

Amaka: -- high school organizing project.

Christopher: High school organizing project. So that -- that's kind of an intermediate thing. That has sort of -- on one hand, it's an off-campus thing, but it's orienting towards a younger crew of people, in part thinking we're going to recruit them to come to Hunter, right. You know. Which was a little weird, but [03:05:00] -- funny -- my sister-in-law now teaches at the high school where --

Amaka: Oh.

Christopher: -- we had that project. So. But yeah. And -- yeah, and one of the things the high school organizing project ends up -- we sort of try and involve allies of ours, off-campus allies. My -- my wife is a high school teacher. We have some other high school teachers that -- this guy [Herm?] who is at this -- teaching at this school that we end up developing the project around mainly. You know, and I've always had a sort of -- going back to my own high school underground newspaper stuff, I have a sort of fondness for, sympathy for organizing --

Amaka: High school.

Christopher: -- high school students. But I also have a sort of, I think, a realistic sense of, one, the volatility of the -- it -- it's very hard to sustain high school stuff for -- for all sorts of reasons. One is you're -- you're really drawing from a pool of people who are all going to graduate within one or two years. Because you mainly do not get the youngest people.

Amaka: Right, right.

Christopher: You're mainly getting people who are older. And you -- and they're operating in a repressive environment. And they're constantly thinking about where -- they don't want to do things on their -- they want to get out of school. They're -- they're -- so it's mercuri-- it just kind of evaporates. So I thought -- I kind of anticipated that. But I was happy to help with radicalizing high school students if we were going to do that. So -- but that was sort of one of these things. There was also this thing -- I don't know if anyone's mentioned the -- the little red study group. The -- yeah.

Amaka: I've -- no one's mentioned it, but I've come across it in -- in the materials.

Christopher: Okay. So yeah. So there was a whole -- there's this idea we needed an -- sort of an adult -- we needed to form a cadre formation, a revolutionary explicitly socialist or communist -- a radical formation. There was a core -- the core of people identified with something like that. I had ceased -- I ceased being an anarchist. Other people came from different sort of -- different socialist traditions or revolutionary nationalist trad-- left-wing revolutionary nationalist traditions. But everyone sort of identified as one sort of socialist or communist. Then -- and so there was this idea that we -- and -- and there was a few -- none of the existing parties, party groups on the left, were satisfactory.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So we were going to try to build our own thing. I wasn't really part of -- this thing started developing before -- while I was in Chiapas. I never joined it as such. It kind of went kablooy before I got involved. I --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: And -- and -- and there was all sorts of weird dynamics. Part of it was also the organization I was in, Love in Rage, went kablooy in '98. So while I'm in Chiapas -- and so some of -- other Love and Rage people are part of this little red study group. And they go on to join other groups and so on. So -- so there's this development of -- there -- there's -- some people are like, "We need to move off-campus into the communities."

Some people are like, "We need to have a revolu-- a sort of more disciplined revolutionary organization that will -- we can be in if we're going to be off the campuses and that can relate" -- and so there's sort of a conception that this will hopefully unify this on-campus, off-campus stuff, and -- and -- and also deal with some of the inequalities that exist in terms of people's level of political development, right. They want to have some mass formations and then a sort of cadre formation. So that's -- it doesn't happen. I mean -- and -- and it -- it -- it's unable to hold together. And -- but SLAM! sort of keeps --

F1: Daddy, do you want ramen?

Christopher: No, thank you. It sort of stumbled forward. SLAM! keeps -- so we keep -- we do the high school organizing project stuff. We're engaged in this process of sort of trying to extricate these -- this -- so we -- partly we end up turning inward, I think --

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: -- as we're sort of trying to untangle this knot of evolving problems. And then there's [03:10:00] -- there's some -- more budget cut stuff comes up. You know, there's a little bump that comes. And then there's Herman Badillo -- what -- what does -- I'm trying to remember. There's some -- I'm -- now I'm --

Amaka: I mean, most of my reading of his stuff was around open admissions. So I'm not sure what he's doing in the post--. I mean, I know that -- I don't know if it's quickly after --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: He runs for some-- like, he -- I don't know if he's still -- well --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: I think he runs for something at some point.

Christopher: Yeah, does he, like, run for Bronx borough president or something like that, or --

Amaka: No, I think that was earlier. But he -- he somehow -- it's -- it's -- it's connected with Giuliani. Like, he --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- runs as his -- I don't -- I don't remember what the position was.

Christopher: Yeah. That comes later. There's an intervening period where he is mainly a loudmouth on the board of trustees.

Amaka: Yes.

Christopher: And he -- he makes -- there's a particular -- he makes these -- this comment about short, straight hair Indians --

Amaka: But that was around remediation, though. Wasn't it? Like, wasn't it around, like -- he was basically making a comment about CUNY students not being, you know, serious students who prepared. And there's all these immigrant students coming in from the hills.

Christopher: Yeah, yeah.

Amaka: Hillside.

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: Don't know how to read in their native language, so how --

Christopher: Yeah.

Amaka: -- could they read English -- like, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so -- but that -- I think he makes the comment --

Amaka: Afterwards, okay.

Christopher: -- after the remediation fight. And so -- so there's a sort of outrage around these comments. And so there's some mobilization trying to, like, get him canned and make him a lightning rod. And then there's some particular demands that are -- I mean, part of it is you also have the beginning of the emergence of Mexican politics within -- within New York, right. Because the Mexican immigrant --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- population is kind of -- before the 1990s, it's virtually non-existent, right. It's -- it's a teeny tiny -- and the Mexican population starts to grow dramatically. And so he's -- there's a sort of anti-Mexican element in what he's saying.

Amaka: Right. Yeah, absolutely.

Christopher: Right. And -- and -- and -- and then there's some -- there's some organized forces within the Mexican comm-- Mexican-American community, Mexican immigrant community, who are sort of -- you know, learning their -- learning their way in stuff. And so this is -- they -- they move on him. And we move on [Emily?], [sort of add her into?] alliance. And -- but that's one of those things of -- you know, you're -- it's a sort of scandal media-driven -- you know.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Guy says dumb thing. We hold protest against the -- who says the dumb, outrageous, racist thing. Which is important to do, but it's -- you know.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: But -- it's -- it's hard to turn it into winnable -- it's hard to turn it into winnable demands. It's hard to consolidate organizationally out of it.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Because there's always some other dumbass thing said by someone else somewhere, you know. It lends itself to the ambulance-chasing school of activism. And it's like, you know, eventually he said it several months ago, and it's not interesting anymore. And so -- so yeah. So I'm -- so we have these things. And then September 11th happened. I'm sort of fast-forwarding a bit here. But September 11th happens. So [Tameka?] -- Tameka -- is it [Esquick?], I think?

Amaka: Beyer?

Christopher: Was it Beyer? It might have been Beyer. I -- I'm showing my age. The -- she was new. She had joined SLAM! the previous spring. And I remember we had a political -- we brought people from SOUL to -- and we organized a week-long summer school training thing, which was really interesting and sort of worked, sort of didn't. But I remember in the course of it at sort of the -- at some point either in the lead-up to it or aftermath, Tameka said -- people were laying out sort of the general anti-interven-- anti-imperialist view of US foreign policy. And there was sort of this -- and -- and there was a sort of assumption that everyone in the room was on the same page and understood this stuff, and -- you know. Because almost everyone was. And then Tameka said, "Yeah, but don't we need the armed forces? [03:15:00] What if somebody attacks us?" Right? And I remember, like, everyone dismissing her. Right? It was one of these like -- you know. And it -- and it -- and it was like -- and -- and I remember -- I -- I -- I remember vividly on September 11th, I was like, mental note. Not -- you know. Unexpected things happen. The -- so yeah. So September 11th happens. And September 11th -- so September 11th changed -- a lot of stuff happens. One is, it accelerates this process of the SLAM! A, SLAM! B, right. Because it creates this utterly -- oh. There's the whole anti-globalization stuff that's going on.

Amaka: Yes.

Christopher: So -- and we're par-- we participate in that in a variety of ways. So people go up to Quebec. People go down to Washington DC. for the IMF World Bank meetings. There's a whole Third World Within contingent that gets organized within the stuff in DC.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So there's a whole sort of building a pan-people of color alliance within this largely white anti-globalization movement. At least in the US, largely white. So there's a whole set of -- there's that. And September 11th happens. And that stuff more or less comes to a screeching halt, right. There's a World Economic Forum that's planned for New York that was going to be the target. But no one can target anything in New York, you know, two months after September 11th.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: I mean, there were some little -- sad little demonstrations that happened that, you know, reminded us all exactly how badly things have fallen out from under us. You know, there's some initial mobilization against attacking Afghanistan. We were -- we were very active in that. And we did a lot of agitation on it. There's some dynamics that happen on -- one is we have a new college president, Jennifer Raab, who is brought in -- who is very much brought in to sort of implement a sort of Giuliani agenda. And she's still there. And she's -- and she's -- and she's kind of smuggled in. I mean, there's a whole -- there's shenanigans involved in her hiring process. And we are actively involved in opposing her being hired and exposing the shenanigans that were involved in how she got hired. But she got hired. And then we were stuck with her. And she came in and -- and so she -- she becomes president like literally at -- in September, I believe. Or August, or -- literally comes in -- maybe during the summer.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But she's -- her first real school year begins with September 11th. And -- and there were a couple things that happened. One is -- first thing, on September 11th we -- I mean, we're like -- we -- we -- we suspect where this is going, right. That this is -- and so -- that this is -- you know, that this is going to be Islamist. That it -- that -- some ugly shit is going to come down around it. And so we organize a blood drive on -- on September 11th. We get -- we sign up the Muslim Student Association, Hillel, and the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at SLAM!. And we --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Christopher: -- put -- put out this thing calling for -- and it -- it's just a flyer, really. It's just telling people where they can go donate blood. Which, as it turns out, doesn't -- every -- every blood bank is completely overrun with people donating blood, right. Because people are like, what do I do? And so all sorts of people go and donate

blood. But -- but it put us in a very strong position of moral authority. And then in the aftermath of September 11th, Jennifer Raab is trying to organize sort of, you know, Hunter responds events. And she wants to just drape it with American flags. And we're like, "No. This is a -- this is a [03:20:00] -- you have a student body that's, like, 39 percent immigrant. And many people have very ambivalent feelings about the United States and US foreign policy. There's -- you know, people are already beating war drums for the -- against some of the countries that these students come from. No, you cannot" -- so -- so it ends up being draped in the college colors. And purple is everywhere. And everyone's wearing purple ribbons. And it -- you know, it's -- but it was this, like -- we're -- we -- we deflect this sort of jingoistic place that the -- at the same time, we had won a referendum in the previous election to raise the student fee -- restructure the student fees in a way that moved a lot more money into the student resource center. And the administration had opposed it. And the board of trustees had vetoed it at the recommendation of the administration, even though we had won this vote. And she wanted to have us -- and then we had done it again. That's it. We had run this referendum two times, and we had won two times. And she was proposing that we should have to do it a third time. And September 11th -- she was doing this before September 11th. We had had some preliminary meetings. She said, "I think that" -- because there had been low turnout. Because nobody ran against us.

Amaka: Right

Christopher: We had -- we -- running unopposed. We would hold this referendum. Nobody showed up. And we -- you know, and we increased funding for the daycare center and for the student resource center. And they understood that we were building a resource capacity that was being used in ways they didn't like. And -- and we -- we drafted -- after September 11th, we drafted a letter which was -- I thought it was a just -- it -- we -- it was a very well crafted statement basically arguing that this is a moment when the college needs unity. And you should not be dividing students by trying to reverse their votes, right, by making them have -- keep having elect-- voting on something until you get the result you want. But it was -- but she was new. She was vulnerable. She was -- and -- and we -- and we won. So we -- we -- we had these preliminary skirmishes with her. But because she was a new president, she had to make concessions. And it would have happened anyway. But she hated us from there on out. And she actively cultivated an opposition, a student opposition, basically out of Hillel, out of the pro-Israel wing of Jewish -- I mean, one of the funny things about SLAM! was, you know, it was this pan-people of color organization that was this -- but there were a lot of sort of, you know -- Rachel is, you know, Asian and Jewish. [Luz?] is Mexican and Jewish. There was a lot of -- there were a lot of half-Jews in this pan-people of color organization. And then there were -- and then amongst the white people, a lot of them were Jews. So -- so the idea that we were some terrible anti-Semitic organization was -- was because we were very openly pro-Palestinian. And so it was, on its face, laughable. But in -- but it was true that there was a pro-Israel block of students who hated us. And -- and -- and so they got training from AIPAC in running campaigns. And then they also had meetings, we subsequently learned, with the administration that coached them on putting together a slate. They ran one slate in 2002. And that -- they lost. But it was -- they made a respectable showing. And -- but they made too much about the -- they -- they -- they made a big deal about the Palestinian stuff. They used that as an issue. That was not what was going to win for them, right. What was going to win for them was the fact that we were spending all of our time off-campus, right. That we were [03:25:00] -- you know, that we -- and -- and -- and, you know, whatever complaints any -- at any given time, there are a dozen clubs that have complaints. And you just identify who those are. You organize them into a coalition. You get the -- and -- and we were in the process of sort of hemorrhaging our -- our experienced leadership. Like, so we were -- I was -- so in 2003, I'm leaving. Kai has left. You know, all these people have left. And -- and -- and so 2004, they lose the election. Or did they lose --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, in 2004 they lose the election. So yeah. So I went to graduate school in the fall of 2003.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: Lucy was born the summer of 2003. And so I'm out of commission throughout that -- but --

Amaka: So I guess, you know, in -- in wrapping up, what -- I mean, what do you see as -- as, I don't know, maybe significant about just this period in regards to, like, the mid-- around the mid-'90s to, I don't know, September 11th-ish? Kind of significance of this period. Because it seems to me that -- you know, I was mentioning even the student resource center, in terms of it being this hub for all these different organizations. SLAM! was very active. But there were also these other kind of organizations in relationship to SLAM! that were also really becoming active in -- and getting into that height of their work as well. So what -- I mean, what do you see as significant about this period and -- and perhaps maybe lessons learned from your participation in it?

Christopher: So, I mean, I think sort of -- trying to figure out how to characterize the period -- I think it's a period in which there is an upsurge following an intense retreat, right. That, in some senses, there's been a retreat going on since the '70s. With ebbs and flows, as there always are. And -- and then the events of 1989

internationally, I think, are -- put the left on the defensive in a big way everywhere. The Zapatista uprising, for me, was significant. But I think in -- there's a crystallization, a re-emergence of sort of anti-capitalist sentiment. There -- there's -- class politics begins to re-emerge in a different way. It's -- it's -- it's not the old class politics.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: But there's a -- there's -- [03:27:49]

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Christopher: -- fracture are able to -- there's some younger -- because what -- what -- what happens in this period? Well, there's -- there's what's happening in SLAM!, but there's the Zapatista stuff. There's the anti-globalization stuff. In the Bay Area, there -- there's SOUL. And -- and there's -- so -- and all of that is taking place within the context of [California Proposition] 209 being called. Other -- other fights. You know, there's a whole series of these fights in the West Coast.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And the fights are, themselves, not particularly successful usually, right. But they're energetic, right. That they -- it -- there's a lot of defeats, but there's a lot of determination to keep fighting. And -- and I think -- yeah. I think there's a -- in some ways, it's -- it's a dress rehearsal for what happens in 2011, I would argue, right. That it's a dress rehearsal for the Arab Spring, for -- that you -- there's a regathering of radical oppositional forces. It's -- compared to what happens in 2011, it's much smaller. It's much more sort of self-contained within sort of move-- already established movement spaces or new-ish -- you know. And then -- and then September 11th happens. And that sort of shuts it down. It shifts the focus to an anti-war focus. And -- and -- but also delivers a serious blow to -- it takes a -- it takes a considerable time for it to recover at all, right. There's some -- you know, I mean, there's an upsurge around immigrant rights stuff, 2005, 2006.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: There's a revival of anti-war stuff, you know, in 2007 and -- and going into the election. But I think -- yeah. So I think it's a -- it's -- it's a moment where there's an interest in -- there's a sort of objective interest in radical -- a more radical critique and -- and a revolutionary or radical approach to carrying out social change. But there aren't the forces; there isn't the coherence necessary to pull it together. There isn't -- there is no organization that is able to meet this thing. There is no -- and -- and related to that, there's no overarching unified analysis that captures the thinking of -- that is able to cohere -- you know, and those are related, right.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: I mean, in -- in order to build an organization, I think you need a coherent analysis. In order to project a coherent analysis, you need an organization. So there's a sort of feedback -- that didn't happen. I mean, there were nodules of it. I think SLAM! was a nodule of that. It was something that had the potential to become that, or felt like it had the potential to become that. I think STORM was another example of that. It was, I think, a more advanced formation in some ways than SLAM!, partly because of its personnel, right. [Reeves?] pulling off of more elite universities. It had people with -- you know, Van Jones, Harmony -- I don't know if you --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: -- you know all these people. But the -- you know, it -- whatever Van Jones's subsequent trajectory --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: -- we -- it's -- you know, the -- CUNY has a more proletarian character, which there are very good things about that. But having a layer of people who come from elite institutions is -- is important, too. Because they -- they bring things that are largely not --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So I think, you know -- I mean, we can -- I -- we can take apart why -- I mean, I think SLAM! and STORM had found some way to -- and there were -- and STORM was developing relations with lots of other collectives. And we started to do the same, too. But they were more advanced than we were. And --

Amaka: What do you mean by more advanced?

Christopher: Well, I think they were more systema-- one is they had a -- they had a more -- they had a more unified politics, right. They -- there was a -- SLAM! was a mass formation under radical leadership that had people from a variety of ideological perspectives. STORM initially [00:05:00] included anarchists, revolutionary nationalists, communists, but basically became a communist organization of a particular character, right.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: And so it was, I think, in a stronger position to play an ideological -- to -- to play that sort of ideological -- I think there were a lot of people in SLAM! who were very powerfully attracted to STORM. And if STORM had said, "We're building a national organization. And, you know, come to our national meeting," we would have all been there.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: And -- and they said, "We're going to do" -- I mean, some people wouldn't have. There were people who -- Kai was considerably less enamored of STORM, right. Because she had a very anarchist sort of thing going on. And so -- but it was -- but that's not how it happened. That's -- I mean, I think you can -- you can sort of rewind the tape and try and figure out who made what mistakes. But I think, really is -- the -- the objective basis did not exist for the kind of formation that we were hungry for. It was -- there was an upsurge. There was a sort of advanced element within that upsurge that was trying to -- hoped to pull that kind of organization out of it. And then the upsurge was blunted. That, you know, events --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: That September 11th happened and -- I mean, it's -- yeah. This is -- I mean, I think for -- I think one of the things that drove people who should have known better into conspiracy theories about September 11th was -- was in fact this feeling -- in 2001, in the spring and summer of 2001, you feel like there's a rising tide internationally of -- of, you know, explicitly anti-capitalist mass protests. We'd come out -- oh, the RNC. We didn't talk about the RNC. But we had a whole orientation towards the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. And we intervened. Some -- some have criticisms of how we intervened but -- in that coalition by pushing the question of Mumia and the criminal justice system. But one of the things that happened as a result of that was a whole lot of the anti-globalization forces began to think about race, a lot of the white anti-globalization forces. There was a whole sort of push around questions of race and -- and -- and -- and an understanding of capitalism that went beyond sort of a -- sort of this crude kind of class --

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: Crudely sort of class reductionist understanding of that. So we intervened in that. And I think -- so you have this -- these dangerous -- and, like, I went to the Ruckus Society. I don't know if you --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christopher: Yeah so -- so, you know, the Ruckus Society, it -- it comes out -- it comes out of Greenpeace. There are people who come out of Greenpeace. They train all these people for the battle of Seattle. And -- but that's a very white, environmental thing. It's radical, but it is -- but they make this turn. They're trying to figure out, how do we relate to -- you know, environmental justice. How do we relate to -- and, you know, I went and I -- I went to one of their trainings. I -- and I -- I gave a workshop on this. But -- on -- on -- on this -- on the political problem of, you know, this -- this movement is an anti-globalization movement. It needs to move itself amongst --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- oppressed peoples in this country. And it can't be this sort of white countercultural thing. And so -- but -- so there's all this ferment. And then September 11th very effectively shuts it down. And -- and I think people have that experience of watching this thing get completely shut down. And you can't help but think, well, that's why September 11th happened.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: I mean, I'm like -- I don't buy the -- I'm not a -- I don't buy the conspiracy theories. But I do think -- but I do think, you know, the ruling class seized on an opportunity --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- and -- and made the most of it, and shut things down very deliberately, and -- and dramatically amped up the level of political -- I mean, the level of surveillance and repression that people have come to accept as normal --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- compared to pre-9/11, it's -- I mean, it's astounding. I mean -- you know, there's some pushback finally around the Snowden stuff. But it's -- it's -- and -- I don't know if that answers your question.

Amaka: No, it does. [00:10:00] Can you speak, I guess, to -- I mean, have you been involved in political work since you -- since the end of SLAM!. So since you entered graduate school and all of that. Can you speak to just sort of --

Christopher: Yeah, I -- much less. I've -- I -- I'm part of a communist formation called the Kasama Project. It's this website, a network of people around the country. And -- but -- but I've mainly been in graduate school and raising my --

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: -- lovely children. And I was involved -- I tried to get involved in work around the Democratic National Convention in 2004, because I think I was at the graduate center. And it was right by the site. But I had a newborn child, or relatively newborn child, and -- I -- I was not able to. And after that I -- you know, I just -- I go to demonstrations. I participated in -- I -- I would go to the major Occupy demonstrations.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: I went down to Occupy on the second day. I sort of stick my nose into things as best I can. But I haven't been able to do mass work in -- anything like the way I did before. The kids are getting older, and I'm -- I have a job.

Amaka: Yeah.

Christopher: So now I feel more freedom to do some -- you know. I'm less anxious about -- I -- I don't have to fill out job applications night and day. So I'm -- I'm -- but now I divide my time between two cities.

Amaka: Right.

Christopher: So I have to figure out if I'm going to do political work in one or the other, or both, or how, or what.

Amaka: Okay.

Christopher: So that's --

Amaka: Well, is there anything else? I mean, you've -- we've spoken for a while.

Christopher: I know. I mean, I -- I -- I'm always --

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