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Interview with Irini Neofotistos
Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Irini: -- project I was actually very excited to meet. And so, I want to tell you a little bit about why it excites me and kind of a point of entry that I'd like to offer you since you're still developing your dissertation.

Amaka: Yeah, absolutely.

Irini: So I also am a sociology student. That's what I studied at Hunter. I was sociology, women's studies and BLPR. I did this kind of like crazy hybrid program. And then I was part of -- at NYU I was part of the Draper Program, so I was able to create my own master's program. And what I focused on was looking at education and public -- I was looking at public policy and funding as it related to education, public education, and the juvenile justice system, between 1990 and 2001. So kind of the questions that you're having are questions that I had, you know, moving forward in my own kind of master's program. But I want to tell you a little bit about what I do now. And then maybe it'll be a way to go back. So I work here at the Union Square Awards. I'm a program officer here. And one of the things that we're committed to is identifying organizations that are grassroots organizations where their doing social justice work or arts work and using -- in particular for the arts program, it's using arts as a tool to talk about social justice, to engage low-income communities and families, and specifically focused on low-income families. And then for the social justice program we have a multi-tiered kind of issue area, issue areas. And I can probably give you more materials. I have this packet of brochures for you. But one of -- and one of our commitments here is, aside from the recognition and from identifying these groups who typically are not on the radar because of what they do and who they talk about and who they engage, is to, one, develop a peer network, two, provide technical assistance toward sustainability -- so these are not one-time actions but sustained. And then, also, the peer network actually is very important. And of course there's a grant associated to that. And I was actually -- I think it's significant for two reasons. One is, if you look at the list of award recipients, there are -- I mean, SLAM! members, whether they were long-term members or one-time kind of folks, are completely embedded within these organizations. And so, there's something to what you're saying in terms of that activism that was sparked as a student, but more importantly to how you manifest that agency throughout your lifetime. So at this point we're, you know, 15 years out. And you have leaders in community organizations. You have executive directors. You have community organizers. You have activists. You have artists. You have educators committed to training this next generation. And so, I don't think that's accidental. And I also don't think that it was accidental that those folks found SLAM!. But what I do think is significant is that I believe strongly in building infrastructure, in archiving, in telling our own stories and in having a place. So one of the other things I've been thinking about in terms of SLAM! -- and what was the other point I wanted to make? I think that the space -- I think that SLAM! having a space at Hunter really became a hub for folks to come to. And I think one of the things -- in all of the conversations that we have about the history of SLAM!, sometimes what we focus on is the activism, the mobilizing, the being out on the streets, which is all valid, the political education, internal structures in terms of how we operated with one another. But I think what's most important is to talk about the structures that were set up, especially in this moment of

history. What was it about SLAM! and its structure that was such a powerful model? Can it be replicated? And is it a good system for -- or a good model as a case study for how to develop this and replicate it? So I think that's what's most excited for me. And I put [00:05:00] a -- I put some thought into why I think it worked so well. But before I do that I want to talk to you a little bit about my role in SLAM!. So I started Hunter College the summer of 1996. I wasn't actually quite graduated yet from high school. So I graduated in May, but I had already begun in the summer of '96. I began officially classes that September, right? And I happened to go to -- it was actually -- let me give you big picture, and then I'll go back to small picture. So I started with SLAM! very quickly and shortly thereafter became their volunteer coordinator. And then I became their senate chair. And I'll talk a little about why that was significant, because one of the things that we were able to do was, we had some discretionary funding from student activity fees. So when students -- and I wasn't involved in that initial takeover of student spaces and how the student government office was created. But I was a part of developing what that looked like once we were in the spaces. So what was really important was that we were able to -- that's the AC. We were able to disseminate resources to students through a club structure. And the clubs were everything from, like, the Haitian Drumming Club -- and you might hear about them because they're a particularly funny case scenario. It was like an all-white group. We were like, what is that? The Palestinian Club, which was a very, like, active group on campus and who members led. Anyway, so yeah, so just creating mechanisms for resources to be out there, but really to activate organizations in little pockets, right, that had the central hub. I served as cultural affairs commissioner, eventually as president of SLAM! and then later on became the editor-in-chief of The Envoy. And The Envoy was a really important part of it because it was the media and information wing of SLAM!. Even though they were separate, they were connected. And the membership was linked. So I think that's one important piece of it. And throughout the history when I served as a liaison with, for example, the college association, to ensure that the spaces we claimed we were able to keep. So for example, there was a student resource center. There was the Thomas Hunter -- and I forget what we called it. It was Thomas Hunter 105, which was basically like a little -- I want to call it a black box theater, but it wasn't black. It wasn't a black box. It was a theater space and a space for us to do parties and rent. So we had additional income from that. So because of the way that it was structured, you can at any point -- anybody at any point could plug into something. It was place that not only were we going to develop politically to find who our peers were, to think strategically about what it means to be a student, what it means to be a part of this network and how we want, you know, the -- what our impact is going to be in the world. So I think one of the important things about SLAM! is that it created a wide, a broad enough frame by being multi-issue, focused on access, and being about self-determination. And then having a thread throughout in terms of political education, not just in terms of learning but in terms of how do we infiltrate this learning into our own practices and developing kind of structures that we thought were fair internally, so that it's not just an outside face. So that there was -- and [00:10:00] because -- I think there were certain people that were really good about the visioning, what was happening outside, training, and community organizing within communities but also in terms of the student population. And then there were people that were really focused on the how we do that but then also sustaining those spaces. And so, everybody was able to bring their skills and develop their skill set without replicating what somebody else brings and having a wide enough net that anybody can plug in. And I think that's what's been significant in terms of this long impact, which is that if you're an artist there's a space for you. But you have this network you're plugging into. And you have peers for life. Any space that SLAM! members walk into, the intent behind their work is not questioned. And I think that's important. You know, that's always a network that you cultivate. So for me what's significant is, yes, what happened then. There are best practices that can be learned from. It was a significant historical moment, but we're in another historical moment. So what was it about that model that was critical? And then, what does it mean in terms of the impact of the folks involved today? And what can be created using that model? So that's what's exciting to me.

Amaka: Yeah, no, that's excellent because, you know, like I said, one of the main questions is, for me, what is the long-term impact of SLAM! on the lives of the people that were involved in SLAM! and you know, the organizations that they came to found or, you know, be involved in, have leadership in, etc. So that's definitely one of the questions that I'm most concerned with in doing this. So yes, that was really helpful.

Irini: Yeah. I mean, I was -- all night last night I was like I wish could have, like, something recording the stream of consciousness, you know, because it's something we're thinking about here in terms of -- you know, the Union Square Awards network is over 230 organizations wide. It started in 1998. I mean, I wasn't a part of it in '98. I was brought in in 2006 to launch their arts program. But in the process, I mean, all of these organizations, there's a dialectical relationship, right? I think SLAM! members have a role, have had a role, in developing those organizations and vice versa. And for us the question as Union Square Awards is, you know, what is the long -- the bigger impact? Do we look at policy? Do we look at new -- and some of the stuff is not tangible. We're talking about creating frames and involving -- bringing communities into a dialogue that are not there or sparking a

conversation where it becomes a policy issue where it never would have been. What are the organizing strategies and tactics, I think? So and then, you know, within that, my role within all of that was one -- my own concern was about the sustainability of the structures that we did have. And then, when we did have actions that kind of were out in the community, my role was more of on the tactical or logistical level. So I've always been, like, the behind-the-scenes person. I was never out in the forefront. But it was important for me that we talk about resources. We talk about tools. We develop leadership and skills, and then how all of that fits in to the whole. So I mean, there's a lot. There's a lot there. I'm happy to -- I don't know. I was even thinking, when you get to the point where, you know, you want to start talking to folks I'll definitely be -- I can definitely link you to which organizations and people are kind of linked at the top of my list, if you want folks. At the top of my list for you to speak to would be Kazembe at the Brecht Forum, Valery Jean at FUREE. And actually, if -- they recently put out an open letter. So FUREE is an organization in downtown Brooklyn. Are you familiar with them?

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Irini: Do you know Valery?

Amaka: I don't know Valery. But I know people that have worked for them before.

Irini: So they put out an open letter to the community, to different stakeholders in the community. And I think it would definitely be good for you to look at that letter because I do think -- [00:15:00] I don't know. When I read that letter, I can see kind of the history behind and the work that's happened since. So I think that might be a nice tool.

Amaka: So was Valery in SLAM!?

Irini: Valery was the first person I recruited. Valery was in SLAM!. So yes, she was.

Amaka: So is the letter online somewhere?

Irini: It is online if you go to FUREE's website. I would definitely speak to Sabrine Hammad. She was in the Palestinian Club, the president of the -- Sabrine Hammad. There were the three Hammad sisters. I'm sure you'll hear a lot about them. Rachèl LaForest, who is now a union organizer. At least she -- as far as I know, for the last few months anyway, since the last few months. Lenina Nadal, who's an artist, kind of a media maker, critical thinker. Sandra Barros -- and I'm talking about, like, these are folks at Hunter who kind of helped shape what SLAM! looked like. There were always folks in the periphery. And I don't know if you want that. But let me just think about who else I would just go down the list with.

Amaka: So the last one was, sorry, Sandra Barros?

Irini: Yes. Sandra -- oh, Sandra. Jed Brandt, now Jed was also -- he was one of those SLAM! Envoy -- he was the one that developed most of our outreach materials, our posters, kind of the framing to the outside. Chris Gunderson, Chris Day. He went by Chris Day then.

Amaka: Yeah, he sent me a whole bunch of documents that have been very helpful.

Irini: Good, yes. I mean, and I think Chris was our -- he was the one that helped develop a lot of the materials that we used. I have a lot of materials also but that are internal to SLAM! student government and also to the materials that we would give out on campus and to, like, meeting notes. And I was part of the executive committee for many years if you ever think that that's helpful.

Amaka: Oh, I'm sure it will be.

Irini: You may have found -- I don't know what's at the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Amaka: There's a whole bunch of stuff. There's 32 boxes. And I've only been through, like, one or two, you know? I haven't even begun to scratch the surface with that. But there's everything from minutes to posters, flyers -- yeah, there's a whole bunch of stuff up there.

Irini: Later, there was like a -- there were lots of waves to SLAM! activity. So I think in the later, in the latter wave, you may want to talk to Alejandro Cantagallo. He served as student government president but then went on to work for the Prison Moratorium Project which MXGM shared a space with. Nilu -- she went by Nellie then -- Choudhury, who went on to work around -- to do work around domestic violence work and is now married to Subhash Kateel, who is cofounder of Families for Freedom. And he currently runs, I would say, one of the most important dynamic radio programs today. And he's out of Miami. Do you know Subhash?

Amaka: I feel like I recently read an article that he might have written about Occupy Wall Street.

Irini: Organizing Upgrade? Oh, maybe, okay. Yes, so he -- okay, so that's interesting because Subhash -- my relationship to Subhash is through Prison Moratorium Project. And I became a member of Prison Moratorium Project after being a member of SLAM!, right? So even -- like, even in looking at the networks and how that happened, I think because it was a multi-issue organization and because people came in looking at different -- you know, with a different lens. Some people were looking at housing. Some people were looking at homelessness, HIV activism, the prison system. I mean, critical resistance was like a key component to how that work then spread and Kai, Kai, of course. [00:20:00] See, that's the hard part about saying names, because then you feel like you

have to have all of the extensive lists. And I'll probably -- tonight I'll be like, oh no, I forgot to mention. But we can continue this conversation, of course.

Amaka: I mean, this is a long -- you know, this is -- hopefully I'll be able to do my dissertation on this, so I'll have time to talk to all these people and contact people. So as many people that you would suggest is helpful.

Irini: Yeah. I think that's a -- I mean, for me that's a -- I know you're already in conversation with Suzy. That's why I didn't mention her. But she would probably connect you to, like, Brad Sigal and Caroline. So yeah, I mean, each of us -- again, each of us had our own niche and developed differently. But I think what was important is that, you know, we're still in communication. We may not be mobilizing on the same issues or working on the same path. Like, I don't know. Maybe the fact that we were giving out those small \$2,000 grants to clubs, we were able to go from, like, 60 clubs to 80 clubs to 120 clubs and create this really rich, like, activity on campus is what brought me to grant making. I don't know.

Amaka: Could be.

Irini: But and to think about support and tools and resources in a different way. But yeah, there's definitely lots there. And just to reiterate, I think the most impactful for me is teasing out what is that model, because I think there's a lot of rich learning.

Amaka: I'm sure.

Irini: Do you have any questions for me? I know I'm rambling.

Amaka: When you came to -- so, you came in, you said, summer of 1996. Can you talk a little bit about your background before you came into SLAM!?

Irini: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so I was thinking a little bit about this, too. So I come up from a very politically-engaged family. My father -- I'm the daughter of Greek immigrants. My parents came to this country, of course, to get their -- to become educated. They wanted to do their own thing. My father in particular, you know, was fleeing dictatorship in Greece. He was in the military working directly with the king, pled insanity, sought asylum here. He was in prison there for a little bit. When he came here he became a community organizer with PASOK, which was the socialist party in Greece, which was the party that overthrew the dictatorship and then became like the people's leader. But he organized from New York the diaspora community and the response from here because he wasn't able to be there. And so, I was very -- I mean, I grew up going to meetings and you know, stuffing envelopes and doing all of that stuff. But and I kind of had a sense -- I had never been part of an organizing community or a community that had these questions. And it was by being part of this movement and reading and learning about, you know, Fanon and Marx and Mao and Lenin. You know, it just became a very rich learning environment. But it didn't end in the -- it wasn't about the learning. It was about how are we going to use this as fuel, right? So and of course, I was just having a conversation with Sabine about kind of the -- I was the youngest in the group. I graduated when I was 16. I started SLAM! when I was 16. So you can imagine the 18 and the 20-somethings felt like they were like a whole generation older than me. And I had a lot of respect for them. But of course, you know, now in my 30s I look back and I was like, we were all babies. You know, we held each other -- the accountability structures that we set up were really important to us. But they were also kickass, you know, kickass in terms of like you really internalized when somebody said, you know, you need to step up or you need to do this or we need to create this. Like, a lot of it was heavy. And so, you know, there was a lot of burnout. People were staying in the office until 2:00 AM [00:25:00] trying to figure out should we get a permit for this rally, or should we just show up? Like, who's going to be there? I mean, there was a lot going on. And you know, we're trying to balance learning how to be adults at the same time and what our place in the world is. But I think there -- I think you're right. There is something significant about that time in somebody's life and the flexibility that you have. And of course, the student population looked different than any other university. We had returning students. We had older students. We had students that were, you know, participating at night. And that meant, like, you know, when do we have events? Do we have it during club hours? Do we have evening hours? How do we accommodate the student body? When do class RAPs happen, you know, whatever? So it was a lot of tough love sometimes but all love.

Amaka: Can you say something about, I guess, the political moment at which SLAM! kind of emerges? It's interesting talking to people, you know, about SLAM! because when I first was kind of hearing about and talking about it with people it was in relationship to all this other stuff that was happening in New York at the time, like (inaudible) Black August stuff. And Jericho, there was all this political prisoner work being done. And so, I mean, could you say something about the -- you know, that political moment, and I guess SLAM!'s relationship to, you know, the other organizations and grassroots kind of movements that are happening in New York at that time?

Irini: Everybody that came to SLAM! had a perspective and were looking for something. And we were teasing apart everything. It's like why is security on campus, you know? It was a time where you're having this, like, militarization. It was the -- you know, the Gulf War is happening. Why are these, like, security guards bothering us? Why is a security guard making more than, you know, the professors on campus? How is that related to, like,

you know, the experiences of black and brown people on the daily? Kind of the corporatization -- you know, it was like -- I mean, there was, like, a lot going on. But in terms of, like, the CUNY card and chips in the card and it's related to your bank statement, I mean, we created links. Because of what everybody was able to bring, we were able to create links to all of those things. Why are people dropping out? Why are we expected to graduate in four years? Is that realistic? We're all working, you know? So it was hard not to make those connections. And then it was hard -- I think because SLAM! was, like, young and vibrant and posters and you know, art and megaphones and articulate and all of that, those community organizations also gravitated to us. We also gravitated to them. I think we had an intent to educate and build leadership within. And so, it just became -- it was a rich time. Like I said, the Union Square awards began in 1998. So similar timeframe -- there was just bubbling of activity. Of course, you know, Giuliani and his policies kind of -- it was -- there was a lot happening. So I don't know if I'm answering the question, but yeah. And I think that does have to do with -- and because we are each -- you know, we were each still living in our communities that were bringing all of that back. Then all of a sudden you're having a conversation with your mother and your aunt and your best friend from high school. And so, it just -- it was just a moment. I think we're in that moment again. And it's interesting because most recently I've been running into folks that I haven't in a long time. It's like, you know, I haven't seen you in ten years. What are you up to? Great. And all of a sudden there's a synergy again. So I think we're in that cycle again. It's a hard -- this particular moment is a hard moment because I think folks are in real crisis. Like, we're even -- even in terms of my work here, part of -- in terms of identifying organizations doing this work, it's really difficult to figure out what are people doing? Are they consolidating resources? Are they talking to each other? What are the networks? But I think in the next two to three [00:30:00] years, you're going to see this emerging. Like, people will come out of this, like, crisis fog into this, like, no, we need to do it. And I think Occupy Wall Street is that. And again I was thinking about the SLAM! model because there's a great power in having a wide enough net that you can catch people whether they want to do this in a sustained way or as a one-time activity, because there was a frame. There was a political frame to the work. Amaka: What was I going to ask? Why do you think -- I mean, from what I've read and talked to people, SLAM! clearly seemed the strongest at Hunter. Why do you think it was the strongest at Hunter and not other CUNY campuses?

Irini: I think it's exactly because we had community spaces, because I think even -- you know, even the city or the Brooklyn chapter of hunter, we had a space that we occupied. And it wasn't just a space. We had various spaces. And we had full control of those spaces. We could be there until 2:00 a.m. And it was midtown. I mean, not midtown, but it was Manhattan. It was easily accessible. I think the sustainability of that space was important. And I don't know that the reason -- you know, clearly folks aged out. There was huge turnover. So you know, the development had to happen over and over again. And it was tiring because you always had new formations. And I don't know if the conditions changed or, you know, people got tired. I mean, I don't know what it was that ended it, right? But I think the space not being there was a critical component. And the reason that it was strong, again, is because of the sustainability of the spaces that we were able to create.

Amaka: So you mean in the sense that because SLAM! had control over so many -- in terms of the student government and student resources and things like that, you guys had space in the way that didn't exist at other places?

Irini: Yeah. Having a community center was important. Having access to be able to print the newspaper and put a flyer out to the -- I mean, The Envoy was being circulated at all the campuses and beyond. It's just what we took with us when we left the office. So yeah, having those resources were key, also because we could barely make our tuition. So where were we going to find extra money for flyers or for whatever, for paint, for, you know, canvas, whatever it was that we needed? And we also had a lot of support on campus. And we had some -- we didn't always have allies. Not everyone was an ally. But we had support.

Amaka: So would that be -- you mean in terms of the student body? Or do you mean in terms of -- I mean, were there sympathetic faculty?

Irini: Yes, there were sympathetic faculty. I mean, I remember being in a class. And I mean, it was expected that it began with a class rep, where we're talking about what's happening this week? What's the activity? That wasn't true for everybody. But I think we were also very selective about what we -- I mean, you had the prerequisite you had to take and whatever, whatever. But we were also very -- there were key faculty members that played a very pivotal role, that were very sympathetic, that stood with us, and that allowed us -- gave us a sounding platform in their classrooms. We used to flyer before classrooms. We used to do presentations before or after class. And we used to have -- we found mentorship in a lot of them. And we would go, and they would be available after class.

Amaka: Can you remember the names of any of those faculty?

Irini: Yes. So Professor Kirkland he was in the philosophy department. And he was the professor that taught Marxism. And he was also very clear about students having representation in various structures, so the college

senate, the academic senate, which he was also a part of. And we would have, like, strategy meetings beforehand in terms of [00:35:00] blocking votes, right? And just to be clear, not everybody in SLAM! -- you know, we had a lot of conversations about electoral politics. So sitting on a body like that wasn't always a popular thing. And it wasn't the role for everybody. So just as a layer to that -- we had -- I said Professor Carter in the sociology department. And he was, I mean, he was key in terms of even giving us, like, food for thought and like, here, read this article. Take this book. But he put his body on the line. He put his title on the line. I mean, I remember going to him when I was applying for NYU, for example. And I said, you know, Professor Carter, I would really be honored if you gave me a recommendation letter. And he says Irini, I would give you -- I went by Irene then. I would give you a glowing recommendation letter, but it would probably harm you. He's like I'll do it, but they're not very fond of me over there. Professor Abdulhadi -- Rabab, she went by Rabab...

Amaka: How do you -- sorry.

Irini: I will write it because I -- do you want me to just write it on your sheet there?

Amaka: Sorry, it's very messy.

Irini: That's okay. Abdulhadi -- she was a Palestinian professor.

Amaka: Thank you.

Irini: You're welcome. Oh God, Espy, Esperanza Martell. There is one name -- oh, Mama Marimba in BLPR. She wasn't known as -- I would have to remember what her -- we all called her Mama Marimba. I mean, she was -- it was one of these classes where she would vet the list of students. And if she didn't want you in her class you were out. So yeah, we had a lot of support. Oh, Professor Ku, now Professor Ku was the...

Amaka: How do you spell that?

Irini: Oh God, I want to say K-U, but I can confirm that. He was not even -- he was not yet chair of the Asian-American studies department. Now, this is significant. We had a BLPR department. We had a women's studies department. We had an Asian American studies department.

Amaka: What is BLPR?

Irini: Black and Puerto Rican studies and kind of integrated Caribbean studies, right? So there was the ability. Well, no, there's actually a political -- there's a political layer here which is that they weren't departments. They were programs.

Amaka: Right, right, yeah, often it's that way.

Irini: And so, I think if you found this trend nationally. But then, it was -- again, it was a relationship because those programs needed the students' support and supported the students. And so, what happened consequently is a whole nother thing, both locally and nationally, in terms of what access to programs like that. But I think it's significant. And we were all a part of that conversation, right?

Amaka: Okay. I'll probably just ask, like, one or two more questions. But I'm wondering how -- it seems as if SLAM! did a really great job of developing leadership, which is why it was able to, at least at some campuses, you know, stay around as long as it did. You know, student activism is notoriously, you know, in waves. People are graduating. They're coming in and out, things like that. In which ways did you see -- like, how did you see SLAM! developing the leadership of the organization?

Irini: I don't know that we said it like this then. But it's what I know to be true now. You learn by doing, you know? Everybody learned. It was trial by fire. There was no guidebook. It's like we need volunteers. Well, how do we do that? Go. Develop a volunteer core. It's yours. Or, whatever the case is, like, there's a rally tomorrow. We need to have a security training. Who has had a security training in the past? Okay, you're the trainer. We need a permit. Who has time? Who's able to go between classes to get a permit? [00:40:00] So I mean, some of it was more thoughtful but not entirely. I mean, sometimes we're like, oh shit, you know, we should have thought to do that. Let's do that next time. It just didn't happen. So I think we -- one, there was an expectation that everybody bring what they can. What are your skills? Good. Do it. Boom, out. But then also, and I'm going to say it again because I think it was important. The fact that we had a space that we also needed to sustain was important because it didn't only mean -- it meant caring for your home, for the people in that home, you know, thinking about, like, HR policies. We need this person. But you know, they need to take a vacation day. Or, you know, they've been in the office from 9:00 AM this morning. What does that mean in terms of, like, your political development in terms of what it -- we had mothers in the collective, you know? What are the expectations? And you know, you're not a mother, so you should step up. There were lots of layers there. You know, we have a meeting we need to prep with, you know? We need to present financials, or whatever it was. But it was happening alongside other things, right? So there was always something happening. And the expectation was that you're learning as you're going but that you're contributing, right? It's not a place you just come and take and bounce.

Amaka: Okay. And I've also heard that it was -- women of color kind of led.

Irini: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: So that is -- because I've heard different -- I mean, I've heard different stories in terms of it's always been like that or it came to be that or...

Irini: I don't think it came to be that. And I don't think it always was that. I think it was very -- look, so this is a little layered because, yes, it was women of color-led. And there were lots of conversations about power and internalized oppression and calling people out at meetings. And meetings weren't always fun. But at the end of the day we had a lot of dedicated people. Like I said, Chris Day, clearly not a woman of color, was the person really responsible for documentation. What does his lens do to the story of SLAM!? So you know, in terms of who does the work -- and then, you know, the other thing is, I think women of color, women, women of color, are always the workers.

Amaka: Right. But I don't think it's always acknowledged or it's always seen as these are the leaders. They tend to be the membership really getting everything done, you know? But it's like in terms of the leadership, so rarely, you know, is it women in charge.

Irini: Yes. So yes, that was the other thing, which is that the women were in leadership, were also the workers, and it worked both ways. I mean, nobody could just walk in and claim it because they weren't doing the work. They didn't know the whole. And so, I think, you know, folks kept that very close. And there was a -- like I said, there was a role for everyone. But that doesn't -- that didn't mean you could do everything or anything, right?

Amaka: Okay, yeah. I mean, I think -- is there anything else that you think is important to emphasize, I guess, for me in this stage of research? Again, I'll be coming back to have more in-depth.

Irini: I mean, like I said, I'm sure you'll want to develop it further and be more focused. But I think as a general lens -- and I'm happy also to be part of this at the shaping moment because these are questions that I'm grappling with and thinking about, you know, from the perspective of, like, models in sustainability and community organizing and collectivity.

Amaka: I've been thinking a lot about sustainability lately, yeah.

Irini: Because, part of the other thing is that we were -- you know, because there -- and I guess this is very important. Because [00:45:00] there were people that were coming with a political background, lens and kind of versed in these conversations, because they were, you know, second-generation folks having these conversations, red diaper babies, children of organizers, right, I think if you look at who was in the leadership, you'll find that those were the people in the leadership. And those folks had a really big responsibility in terms of, like, okay, now how do we educate others, and so there always being a commitment to teaching and learning and continuing to grow. But you know, but it was hard sometimes to be part of the conversation if you're not radical, if you don't know who Marx is, if, you know, you're not red enough or whatever. So there were hard moments. And there were moments where people felt very excluded and isolated and didn't want to be part of it and left burnt and angry. But that's the truth of it, too.

Amaka: Yeah. So how did -- political education seems central to everything, or a lot of what you guys did. How did that, I guess, work on the day to day? Did you -- was it a part of kind of organizational meetings? Did you have kind of, you know, things that were more open for everybody else to come into, you know? How did you guys see political education, you know, relating to your work? And how did -- I mean, I'm assuming that it probably brought some people into the organization, too. I mean, just talk about that process.

Irini: Yeah. I mean, it went through different variations throughout the history. And it was something as simple as calling out somebody's behavior that was inappropriate to looking at kind of policies on campus and around our neighborhoods. So you know, being able to talk about an experience -- you know, I was on the train today, and somebody said this to me, you know, talking about race and class and gender in that way, from a very, you know, personal-is-political way. Then, I think there were moments where we developed guides, you know? I remember, you know, I don't know, Patricia Collins', you know, Black Feminist Thought, you know? That was being circulated. And you may not have been reading it, but somebody else was, and quoting it. So some of it was informal. Some of it was formal. Like, I ran into a binded political education on women's rights, for example. What is cultural work? We'd have these conversations, you know? And there were some official study groups. And there were, you know, actual articles being circulated. So I think it happened in a formal way but also in an informal way. But it was expected that you were -- you kind of -- everybody had a magnifying glass on everything. And maybe it was because we were in a learning environment and it was expected. And of course you're in class and you're reading about something and it relates to something else. So I think everybody was able to bring resources, yeah.

Amaka: All right. Well, thank you.

Irini: Sure.

Amaka: That was very helpful.

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