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Interview with Kazembe Balagun
Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: [00:00:00] Can you clarify your name?
 Kazembe Balagun: My birth name is Keith Alexander Mitchell. I'm known as Kazembe Balagun.
 Amaka: And your age?
 Kazembe: I am -- Oh, shit, I'm going to be thirty seven. (laughs)
 Amaka: (laughs) Ok --
 Kazembe: Yeah, thirty seven. I was born on May 16th, 1976.
 Amaka: Also -- and I don't know if I mentioned it before -- if there's a particular question that you don't want to answer, that's cool, we --
 Kazembe: OK.
 Amaka: -- can just skip. How would you describe your gender?
 Kazembe: I describe myself as a male.
 Amaka: How would you describe your sexual orientation?
 Kazembe: I am bisexual.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: And how would you describe your marital status?
 Kazembe: I am married.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: And do you have children?
 Kazembe: Yes, I do.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)
 Kazembe: Yes.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yes. OK, yes.
 Kazembe: Like, it is official. (laughs)
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs) OK, those are like the most --
 Kazembe: One child, yes.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: -- census oriented questions --
 Kazembe: Exactly one child.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: -- and then we'll move on.
 Kazembe: Exactly.
 AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK, so where were you born and raised?

Kazembe: I was born in New York City, Mount Sinai Hospital, to be exact. I was raised on st Street and 8th Avenue in Harlem in the Polo Grounds Housing projects.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK.

Kazembe: I am the youngest of three children. I have an older sister named Wanda, and older brother named Benjamin Mitchell Jr.. And my parents, Mildred Mitchell

and Benjamin Mitchell were both born in Charleston, South Carolina. They came here in the 1960s to New York City as part of that, kind of, last wave of migrants from the south to the north. When they first got here in New York, my mother was working as a domestic at the Rockefeller Institute -- the university -- and my father was a bus boy at the Jersey Shore. They came to live in Harlem, single occupancy room, and then they moved in together when they had my oldest sister in 96 on Sherman Avenue in the Bronx. At the time, Sherman Av -- That was right next to the Bronx Public Court House, when that neighborhood was still somewhat integrated, mostly Jewish, the Grand Concourse. They moved to the Polo Grounds, I think, in '69, '70, when it was first opened as a public housing projects. As you probably know, the Polo Grounds was opened -- was a baseball stadium where the New York Giants used to play and the New York Jets. And they tore it down to build public housing, which I also timed -- So back in those days, they tore down, you know, stadiums and built housing. Now we tear down housing to build stadiums. (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: It's true.

Kazembe: So, yeah, so that's the context of (inaudible). And then my brother was born in '69, and then I came in '76. And I was -- Yeah, the last child. Yeah, so I grew up in Harlem.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: So how would you describe Harlem when you were growing up?

Kazembe: Oh, man, Harlem when I was growing up. Harlem when I was growing up, I think that Harlem was in a very deep transition. I remember just being a kid and, you know, st Street is at the end of central Harlem. You know, so I was raised -- You go any further north, it's the Polo Grounds, then the colonial houses, then the Harlem River Drive. You're going into upper Manhattan into the Bronx. So I grew up in, you know, right by the river. Harlem, when I was growing up... I mean, Harlem was still community, it was also still a space of this, like, you know -- You felt the wealth inequalities, certainly. You still saw some glimpses of the Black Power Movement. You know, I tell people all the time that, you know, growing up there, I remember seeing, like, downstairs from my building was a karate dojo. (laughs) You know what I'm saying?

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: And it was like, you know, when you're growing up -- I remember, like, watching Channel and watching the drive in movies. Like, Wu Tang Clan using the soundboards. But that's how we grew up. You know, you watch the kung fu movies, then you go downstairs and you see these black men and black women sweating and disciplining their bodies. Then you have the thing where you (inaudible) at times, you know, you had a little oval in the middle of the projects, then all of a sudden, there's somebody, might just do some, like, free jazz. And I'm like six years old, and I'm like, "What the hell is this going on?" Like --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: Like, you know, just out of nowhere. And then, you know, but, you know, mostly, you know, but then, you know, there were a lot of play. Like, you know, like [00:00] kids playing in the middle of the projects, running around. You know, running around the projects, "I'm going to your house," "You're coming to my house," you know, people fed you, you know, you stepped into different doors, you saw different aspects of blackness. Like, for me, it was, like, you know, my family read Ebony, my best

friend's family read Jet. (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? You know? And it was like -- You know what I'm saying, like, my dad smoked Kents, you know, my best friend's family smoked Kools. You know, it's just like, you know, you can run to the store and get cigarettes for you parents, seventy-five cents. So, it was just kind of like that thing when things were just much more open. And then like, and then,

of course, I remember when crack hit. And then, like, I took my time, like, I didn't need Nancy Reagan to tell me not to use drugs, because I saw that shit up front. (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: And I was like, "I ain't touchin' that shit." You know, so like -- But that's when I felt like Harlem really got crazy. Because I felt like -- I'll give you a concrete example, like, when I was growing up, like, you know, you still had, you know, on the corner, on

st Street and 8th Avenue, right off of Briemhurst, you still had, like, a Five and Dime candy store that's run by Jewish owners. You know what I'm saying? In, like, around '8, '8, that closed down and up opened, like, a twenty-four hour day, like, chicken spot. You know? In this, like -- And once you notice, and from what I've noticed is that a lot of the bars, a lot of social scenes, like some of the bars I remember, like, as a kid, the Third Planet, like a lot of the bar scenes kind of closed. And then the bar scene was replaced by the liquor store scene. You know? And so like, you started seeing, like, these different things where, like, the various spaces of nurturing -- at least in even, like, a very after-hours level --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- was, like, erased. And, you know, but at the same time, you had this other sense of, like, the rise of, like, the hip-hop culture. So, like, living on

th Street and 8th Avenue, I was exposed to, like, the Rucker playground, you know, and the basketball tournaments over the summer. The Rooftop, which was like, I don't know if people should even -- I don't know if people have ever written about the Rooftop, but the Rooftop was one of The, like, epicenters of, like, hip-hop culture, because during the day, it was a roller skating rink and an arcade, but at night, it was, like, this concert hall. And, like [KRS-One] performed there, Marley Marl, like, KRS-One -- Like, I remember, he premiered, like, The Bridge Is Over There. Like, I mean, a lot of this BDP stuff got premiered there. I still remember the pride of seeing, like, Erin B. and Rakim's "I Ain't No Joke" being played, being shot at the Rucker. I remember seeing Gene Ray, who was the principal character of Fame, lived in the pull-around. Cockroach, Theo's best friend --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yes! (laughs)

Kazembe: Um -- (laughs) -- grew up and lived in, and share the same barber with me, in the colonial. So there was this, kind of, universe that kind of existed where, you saw this kind of sense of black power, and then, you know, you had people who did, like, who still did, like, street

corner stuff. Like Nation of Islam folks, lot of Five Percent-ers, a lot of, like, folks that did the political stuff, so -- I'm sorry, I'm going off --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: No! No, that's perfect!

Kazembe: (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: You going off is perfect! Like, you don't have to apologize, because you --

Kazembe: Oh, I'm sorry, you just said, you know -- Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, like I said, I say, it was a very... it was a very dynamic community. A lot of stuff was happening. You know, when I was a kid, I went to PS 6 for two years, which was on the corner of, like, the further reaches of, like, going towards 6th or whatever Street. That was a local public school. I went there for first and second grade, and then I started going to school up in the Bronx to co -- I mean, not (inaudible), First Lutheran. I went Carnegies later. And, you know, but, you know, it was just, like, it was a dynamic community. I mean, just like, a lot of st-- I mean, you felt the love of danger, because of all the stuff was happening with drugs, but at the same time, you kind of felt this kind of sense, like, "OK, I know where I live," and --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: -- you know what I'm saying? You know, you know, you just know not to go to this place, not to go to this beach. My mother was very strict, she was like, "Look, if I don't your friend's parents, you can't hang out with that person because I don't know who their parents are." You know what I'm saying? And that was a big thing for my folks. That was like, "I need to know who your parents --" "Who you're hanging out wit," you know. It just being very much,

like -- And also just, like, that level of, like, guardianship. Like, my mom had a friend, [00:0:00] Ms. Ruthie, and Ms. Ruthie lived on the fifth floor, corner two, and she used to stare out her window. She was like, "I saw your older brother Jamie," you know, "getting in a car with somebody. Who was that?" And she would call my mom. (laughs) And that would be it. (laughs) You know what I'm saying? Like, if you see somebody on the corner, and, like, that was a thing that was, like, that level of community, where, the people who first moved to the Polo Grounds still had the connections with each other and supported each other as with the growing up of the children and --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: -- all that stuff. So it was, you know, bad, but at the same time, you have this deep, like, structural inequality.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right, right.

Kazembe: So it was, like, if you live in Harlem and you take the M-0 bus downtown, once you cross, like this (inaudible), once you cross 0th Street, it's a whole different world. As a young child, you're, like, wondering, like, "Why is it so different?" Why is it when I'm on th Street, everything's broken down, but when I get downtown, everything's, like, clean and nice. You know? And people have doormen. And you know what I'm saying? And, like, the toys are super expensive and so... That was -- So you get a sense of that class inequality. And that was something that kind of struck to me as well.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK. So then -- And you can speak to Harlem generally about this question as well, but were you raised in a political household? And you can talk about that in any way -- Politics, it's always very (laughs) broad --

Kazembe: Yeah, excuse me.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: -- term. Yeah.

Kazembe: I get, like, a lot of that times question t-- Like, how did you become a communist at sixteen years old and, like, your parents aren't red-diaper babies. And, like, I mean, your parents weren't communist -- my parents weren't communist. And the thing about my parents were just, like, they weren't communist, (laughs) but they def-- I think that what happened is, they were definitely conscious. And something I tell people all the time is that you know a movement works when people who are not necessarily political attaches themselves to the program. And, like, one thing for me was just, like, I feel like my parents were very much into, like, what I call, like, the "revolutionary aspects of black kitsch." Which is like (laughs) the mass-produced products of the ninet-- of the Black Power Movement that made black power and black identity accessible. So, like, for me growing up, like, my folks had the big wooden spoons, the big wooden forks and, like, all that and the afro stuff --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs) Yeah.

Kazembe: -- my dad had a little short afro like I have, you know, (laughs) my mom had an afro, you know. When I was a kid, I remember, I used to play with He-Man,

and my dad bought me, like, Sun-Man, or (laughs) you know what I'm saying? Which is a black superhero. Which, ironically -- (laughs) This is -- I mean, you can't make this shit up. The enemy of He-Man was Pig Man. You know, like a pig? You know what I'm saying? And it's like, that's like that 980's --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- afro-centric shit.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: That's just hilarious. You're like, "What?" Like, "Really?" And I'm, like, playing. Pig Man was Pig Man, and it's like -- So I think my parents were conscious. And that conscious came out of growing up in the segregated south --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- being subject to racism, being subject to medical racism -- You know, my grandmother on my father's side died of diabetes. You know, and my other grandmother had all sorts of ailments, you know, that was based upon, like, medical racism in the south. But also this other

part of it, too, was that, you, the strength of the Trade Union Movement. You know, like, my father worked at the

post office, worked at the big one over here on

th

Street, and he worked in the back. They call it [Morgan?]. He did the processing; he was a mail handler. My mom worked at NYU in the medical center, and so she was a part of 99. So, like, so as a kid, she would take me to the 99 demonstrations, sometimes I would go down to the union hall and -- to this day -- they still have the same form -- You know, go to the union hall, see the big woman with the big afro -- I think it's supposed to be Angela -- and see the pictures. And then, you know, and it was, like, beneficial that too, I mean, in 99, you get four to six -- It's stated in the contract of 99 workers that your child, that your children, children of members, from the age of seven to eleven, are guaranteed four weeks of summer vacation. So that meant that 99 paid for me to go to summer camp. You know? So I was exposed to all sorts of different summer camps as a kid too. The more progressive one was Camp Thoreau, which was based upon very much, like, the Freireian model of [00:00] organizing summer camp, where the camp was self-organized. There wasn't this hierarchy of the camp director, then the counselors, then the cooks, and then the campers. It was, like, the campers were responsible for working, so the campers made the

meals, we had work assignments, you know, and then we also had this thing where this -- You know how these summer camps have, like, I mean, like -- I don't know, I've worked at day camps and then, like, (laughs) you have these Bataan death marches to the summer fair -- (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: These -- There's a little pool --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and the pool, like, then, like, fifteen blocks away, you had to walk --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know, like, there was a decision that we're like, you know, you had to do an activity in the first period, but in the second period, you didn't have to do an activity, you could do whatever you want to do. You know what I'm saying? You could just hang out. You know what I'm saying? You've got to socialize. And you know? And then, like, within that summer camp, Camp Thoreau, there was, like, this deep sense of, like, talking about political equality, talking about what was going on in South Africa, talking about the civil rights movement, talking about -- We had games based on, like, fighting

against wealth inequality. You know what I'm saying? And, like, you know, in that milieu, the campers themselves -- because we're integrated, right? -- they would come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, we're exchanging cultural information too.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: You know, so when I went there, I'd never listened to rock and roll. You know what I'm saying? I was strictly hip-hop. And a lot of the people who were strictly rock and roll, never listened to hip-hop. We made contact and exchanged. So I listened -- Like, I came back home and I listened to Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, you know? And they'd start listening to Public Enemy, NWA, and to this day we're still good friends.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Oh!

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? We really shaped each other's consciousness in terms of that. And that was consciousness-forming for me too, because then I began to think about the world, what the potential of what the world could be, in terms of, like, these people who I would never have -- And then, all of a sudden, this weird thing happened, was like, I began to understand and look at the

contradictions of these people who I never would have had contact with outside, you know, outside in any other context.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: So it shifted my consciousness. Within that too was the fact that, you know, we had this, like, kind of, like, really (inaudible) black power culture that was really integral within hip-hop. So, like, for me it was just, like -- I was telling Doug, that pastor today that, you know, like, you know, when I was in sixth grade, I remember people being like, "Don't wear Reebok, cause Reebok supports apartheid South Africa."

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? And like, this is sixth graders talking. You know? And like, so, that youth movement in South Africa was translated back to here into how we saw each other's conscious. You know? And it was just, like, the time of De La Soul and Public Enemy; it was very cool to be conscious.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: It'd be like, you know, "I'm not down with this materialism." And it was survival too, because, you

know, there was, like, the materialism too that was, like, you know, of less, like, hip-hop materialism and --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: -- the, you know, the Jeeps --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs) Yeah.

Kazembe: -- with the big sounds, the big chains, you know, the -- All that stuff. And then making decision like, "OK, well, I'm -- You know, that's cool, but I'm not down with that. I'm down with this, like, you know, leather" -- (laughs) Leather. I just joke about it, I'm sorry, but it was --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: No, you're OK!

Kazembe: -- it was -- That's the thing about, you know -- Like, you know, it's funny when you think about it, because, like, the conflicts that we see in metallurgy and craft making --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah!

Kazembe: -- (laughs) You know what I'm saying? So it was like, "I'm down with this craft making of this, like, you know, this leather, this small leather medallion of Africa --"

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Afri-- Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? That I'm going to wear as opposed to a chain. You know? And it's weird when I think about it now, and, you know, in my, you know, in the Marxist sensibility of, like, rejecting a sort of level of a line of production (laughs) and going back to another one. You know what I'm saying? So, and so that was a -- So, like -- So when people ask me if I was political, like, that feeds into SLAM! because that was a time, that was a context in which we were all growing up in to where the consciousness was just part of it. And because it was so separate from, like, mainstream and mainstream didn't care about us, we could have shaped it in any way we wanted to. So for example, like, I didn't really -- It didn't really bother me that MTV didn't show black videos, because, like, I watched video music blocks.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And I came home after school and, like, (inaudible) would just do the show for free. You know? And I remember -- this is the funny stuff -- me and my best friend Jason Buchanan would take the train home together from the Bronx. He lived on 67

th Street and the Concourse. We'd take the train from the Bedford Park [00:0:00] down -- He would get off on 67th Street, I got on at th, we would talk the whole time on the train, go home, I would run upstairs, call him up --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: And watch --

Kazembe: -- and watch -- (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah! (laughs)

Kazembe: And talk about videos! You know? Exactly! It drove my parents crazy cause back then, there was no call waiting. So, like, my parents didn't -- So you'd have to use -- My mother, if she had to call us, had to get the operator to break into the call --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: You remember that shit?! (laughs) Because, you know, it was -- Before, it would just go (imitates loud beeping) DEH DEH DEH! Because me -- Because I -- Because we would just be on the phone for hours, just talking, like, "Oh, snap! Look at! A Kwame video!" And blah, blah,

blah, blah, blah. And, you know, joke about it and then come back the next day and talk about the videos.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Right.

Kazembe: Again. So, it was, you know, it was a good

-- I mean, for me in terms of political, that kind of black public sphere and also the smaller ways too, like the fact that, you know, I would come home and see people from the Five Percent Nation, like, selling Malcolm tapes. You know what I'm saying? They'd be, like, "Listen to this." You know, like, you know, those are all the things that kind of shaped my consciousness. And I would, like, you know -- Another story, like, for me it was, like, I remember this, being on a train on my way to school and people from Decemberth Movement would be selling copies of "Arm the Masses." They're like, "Buy a copy of Ar-- " And then I'd be in [The Cannonball?] like, "You know, brother, the black flag that's always in front of The Cannonball? You buy "Arm the Mass" (inaudible) on theth?" (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: Let me get put on first, you know, like --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: But he would give me copies and then you'd read, like, "Arm the Masses." You know? In this, like -- So I'm not saying that to say this was some sort of, like, black Neverland of just, like, nostalgia; it was very hard. You felt very much, like, the level of poverty. I was on

cheese -- I mean, I remember the cheese lines that gave the free peanut butter. I remember peanut butter, getting the free peanut butter, and then, like, it had an oil in it, and refusing to eat it. You know what I'm saying? And, like, my parents were like, "It's just as good as any other peanut butter." And I'm like, "No, fuck that shit." And then, like, seventeen years later, going to Whole Foods and seeing the exact same --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yep!

Kazembe: -- thing because that's --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Organic!

Kazembe: Organic! You know what I'm saying?!

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughing)

Kazembe: Same with olives! And I'm like, "Goddammit!" How the hell are you gonna tell me --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- that you're gonna sell this shit for seven dollars and I was getting it for free!"

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yep.

Kazembe: So, you know what I'm saying? So it was this, like, you know? So, like, you feel -- So, like, so, you know, I'm pretty -- I mean, you know, I look back on it

politically, but it's also what politicized me was also the depths of the wealth disparities that I saw day to day. Right? The fact of the matter is, that having friends who didn't eat. When I was sixteen years old, you know, working in the summer-- When I was fourteen, fifteen years old, working in a summer camp and seeing kids not eat. You know what I'm saying? In Harlem. Seeing my friends who I grew up with get involved and then shot in the drug game. Like, you know, all these things. And this -- And just having this kind of sense of, like -- And then seeing the wealth, and that producing this rage inside of me in terms of, like, what's going on. Like, why is it that, you know, in seeing the wealth also within, like, my friend circles at camp, you know? Like, you know, being in a situation where, like, you know -- I've had friends who invited me over to their house and me feeling ashamed to be there. (laughs) You know? And then, like, their parents looking at me, like, kind of following me, if I would -- (laughs) You know what I'm saying? Because they felt like I was going to steal something. You know? Like, you know? And, like, so, thinking -- And not having the language to understand that? And then having it to the language. So,

if I were to put, like, a timeline on it, I would say that the thing that really broke for me was, like 99. 99 was -- A couple things happened. One was I -- The Democratic National Convention was held in New York City, and so after school I went to my sister's job -- she was working for the city -- and,

you know, I got a bunch of socialist newspapers -- they were just handing them out -- and I read every single one of them. And I read every single one of them. I was like, "Oh my god, this is so crazy. This is insane." Like, "This is amazing." '9 was also the year that there was a major uprising riot in Washington Heights where thous-- Where, like, you know, hundreds of people got arrested, you know, there was fire set on the streets based on the police brutality of the killing of a Dominican man in Washington Heights. And I saw that visually because the cops actually set up a command station in the, you know, at the foot ofth Street. The other big thing, obviously, was the Los Angeles Rebellion.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? And that was, for me, sixteen years old, was just, like, [00::00] seeing that on TV, seeing that and remembering the years of seeing Rodney King

being beaten with the video camera, this kind of was just, like -- That's when I decided, I was like, "You know what?" Like, "I want to be a revolutionary." Like, "I want to fight for a different type of world." And that kind of the year that, for me, that kind of happened. And, you know, and that when the year that -- You know, I made a self-conscious decision, I was, like -- I was going to the, like -- I was working in this, like, kind of summer camp and doing the summer camp, I was, like, walking around, going to Schomburg, and I would just, like, read stuff. And I was looking through different things and, you know, I asked -- You know, and you know, I don't know what it was. Maybe it was just, like -- I don't know how I found out about it; I have no idea. It was just, like, somebody -- Maybe I saw something, made a pass, and was like, black woman with an afro, I was like, "Oh, Angela Davis." So I read a little bit of her, I said, "This says she's a part of the Communist Party." And I was like, "I want to be some -- " You know? And I remember reading some of this stuff, making the connections, but then I decided that I was, like, "I want to become a communist." So I was like -- I called Silas in the phone book, you know, pre-internet.

(laughs) And I was like, there it was, like, the commu-- And I called up the Communist Party, and I said, "I want to join. And I want -- " And I figured that that was the point where you went (inaudible). And I read the newspaper and -- You know what I mean? And what politicized me was, at the time, there was major -- There was -- This guy was running for office in the district, actually, funny enough, where I lived. So I actually worked my -- So I was sixteen years old and I worked on the assembly, the election campaign of David [Mertz?], which is for the state assembly. And so I was sixteen years old, I was handing out newspapers, I was doing street corner demonstrations, and I was doing a bunch of stuff. You know? Organizing.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: (laughs) You know? And it was fun. I had a great time doing it. My parents flipped the fuck out.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs) OK.

Kazembe: (laughs) My parents were like, "What the fuck are you doing onth Street," you know, "talking this stuff?" You know? People called my parents, were like, "You know, he's onth Street. Is he working the Democratic Party?"

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: "What is he doing?" Like, you know, "No," and it's like, "he's communist." And my parents, my mother was like, "It's a phase." "He's just rebelling." "Is he still at that?" But, you know, but for me, it was a point where it was just, like, you know, I don't really -- You know, at that time, I felt like... I felt pretty much, like, it was all opening for me. It was kind of, like, a place where I wanted to, kind of, think about how I was in the world. And, you know, and it was a point where I was just, like -- It gave me a certain level of agency. Like, I was like, "I can affect the conditions of my community." And I learned a lot doing street corner organizing. Like, I learned a lot. I talked to all sorts of different people, you know, I had people come up to me, let's say, give me a dollar, I reach -- You give me a dollar, I'd give you a leaflet. (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: And some days it was so bad I thought about that, like -- (laughs) You know, I had people just, like, come up to me -- this nationalist -- being like, "What the fuck are you doing?" You know what I'm saying? "Don't you

know who you're working with?" Like, you know? And like, you know, learning. But that was the thing, it was a back and forth, right? And, yeah. So I was sixteen, joining the communist league, went to -- was at Connor Hayes, and just continued to do that. And I was in the young communist league from the age of sixteen until nineteen, which was, I think, nineteen, that was -- That would put me around in '99. And that was the time when I was -- That was the story when I started getting involved with SLAM! --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK.

Kazembe: More politically.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK, so what years did you attend Hunter?

Kazembe: Oh, man, so I attended Hunter -- let me see... Lord have mercy.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: It seems like such a long time ago. It was '96 to -- I graduated in 00.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: OK. Did you go to Hunter directly after high school? Or did you --

Kazembe: No, I did not --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: -- take time off?

Kazembe: No, I did not go to Hunter directly after

high school. So what happened was -- So what happened was, I went to **Connor Heyes** and, like, you know, I came home like all the other kids that came home, which is these glossy brochures and, like -- You know what I'm saying? Like, you know, College of Saint Rose and the Niagara. I was like, "Mom, you know, I'm going to live this fabulous lifestyle, I'm going to go away, and all you've got to do is sign off on a loan." And my parents were like, "Look, there's two schools you're going to. CUNY or SUNY." (laughs) And, OK, that's affordable --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- that's what we could afford. So I didn't -- Initially, I didn't make the cut for CUNY, the CUNY (inaudible) college I wanted to go to.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Which was?

Kazembe: Which was Hunter. So what I did was I went SUNY Old Westbury for two years. And there [00:0:00] I went -- I did a philosophy program. And actually, philosophy and playwriting. And the funny thing that happened to me around that time was that my brother went to Hunter. And the reason I knew about Hunter, was on my radar, because my brother would bring home -- Like, my brother was a part of

this group called Alpha Phi Omega, it was social fraternity. He would invite me to some of the parties. He would bring home newspapers, copies of The Shield, which was Hunter's black newspaper. And so I was like, "Oh, wow, Hunter has a black newspaper, that sounds really cool." But I went to SUNY Old Westbury for two years, and then as I was taking philosophy, and my philosophy person at Hunter was like, "Look, you can stay here, but, like, you know, there's only so much you're going to get out of staying at SUNY Westbury." You know? "You can go to Hunter, which has a really rich philosophy program." And I thought about it and I was like, "I want to Hunter." But what really made me want to go to Hunter was what happened in '99. So, basically, '99, I'm a student at SUNY Westbury, I'm a member of the Young Communists League, and then, you know, and then, you know, Giuliani's just in office, and Pataki's in office and, you know, and there's all these, like, talk about cuts. Like, you know, raising tuition, raising tuition, you know, cutting student aid, and you know, and, you know, and I'm not really formally active at SUNY Westbury, but some of the people I know at SUNY Westbury are like, "Look, there's going to be this huge

demonstration on March rd. You know, we're going to go -- We're taking a bus, SUNY Westbury students are going over there." I get a call from Joe Sims, who's a political affair coordinator -- Editor of political affairs, and his other brother named [Shicano?], who, we're going to watch yell together, he calls us over to the seventh floor. We knew it was important, because, you know, the seventh floor is the way the Communist Party's office works; it works in a hierarchy.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: That there are eight floors in the national executive committee --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughing) Oh, lord.

Kazembe: -- the seventh floor is kind of, like, that middle functionaries. You know? It was a whole thing; it's a whole thing. But we get called to the seventh floor. And they're, like -- There's two things he said. He was like, "There's this thing, this big demonstration of March

rd and we are feeling something huge." And, "There's a bunch of ultra-leftists who are trying to take control of this whole damn demonstration. You know, and we need to be involved in it." And the person -- The one person that he called out, actually -- which is hilarious -- was [Jet Brett?]. And he was, like, "This guy, Jet Brett," -- I never met Jet Brett in my life. He's like, "This guy, Jet Brett is a troublemaker." (laughs)

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: "He's a troublemaker, he's a loudmouth, he's causing all sorts of trouble for the coalition, like, he's, like, agitating, you know. We have to check this guy out." So, so --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) So funnily enough, there was a demonstration before the rd -- a few weeks before at Albany. And I got the feeling of the difference in terms of what was going on at CUNY, because I went on this demonstration, and the buses were packed, and folks were, like, really, like, hyped up. And this was, like -- And this was supposed to be --

(another person enters)

Kazembe: Hey, what's going on?

M: Hey (inaudible) --

Kazembe: How are you doing? Good, doing good, doing good. Good to see you.

M: Good to see you too.

Kazembe: Give her a hug --

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Hey!

Kazembe: Hey. What's going on?

M: (inaudible).

Kazembe: No problem.

M: OK.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Hey.

M: I'm just going to say hi.

Kazembe: Hey, how are you doing? Good to see you --

M: (inaudible) what you're up to.

AKAMA OKECHUKWU: Hey. Amaka.

Kazembe: Say hello.

M: Good to meet you --

AMAKA: Good to meet you.

Kazembe: Yeah, we'll catch you up in a second, all right?

M: Good. Take your time.

Kazembe: All right, cool. So, like, so, yeah. So we go all the way up to Albany. And, like, and then we get to Albany, and then, like, you know, it was supposed to be -- It was under the guise of the United States Student Association. Kind of, like, NYPIRG Lobby Day, but, like, the radicals hijacked it. So they took the (laughs) buses, they went up, and they basically had a disruption in Albany. I wasn't there to see -- When this -- But, from what I saw in the aftermath and what I heard, like, plate glass windows got broken, doors got kicked in --

Amaka: I heard that as well.

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: Folks, like, ran up to do the stairs and, like, put up a banner drop. And, like, I'm eighteen [9?] and I'm, like, "Whoa, I've never been a part of a demonstration like this before. This is amazing." And so then we were going back down -- They were going back down, and then, you know, and I'm on the same bus with, like, with the Jet Brett.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) Jet Brett is on the bus, and he's,

like, “We can’t leave, my friend Chris Day” -- Christopher Gunderson -- “is still out there. [00::00] So we can’t go” (laughs) “until Chris Gunderson comes out.” So we’re all sitting on this bus, waiting to go, and Jet’s holding up the bus. (laughs) You know what I’m saying? And then finally -- And then I’m trying to overhear and trying to, just, spy on the condescension, (inaudible) spy, and stuff like that. And I’m just hearing (imitates indistinct mumbling), like, you know, this little stuff I’m hearing about, you know, you know, the success of the demonstration and, like, what we need to do later. And, like, March is going to be big. Like, March is going to be big. And so, you know, and so, like, and you know, and I kind of, like, introduced myself, I was like, “Hey, I’m Keith Mitchell, and blah blah, I’m part of the YCL.” And they kind of just gave me a look. You know? (laugh) And just, like, “Whatever.” And so -- So that’s when I first met Jet. Unofficially. Then Marchrd happens, right? And basically, like, you know something is going to be big when, like, you see flyers for it everywhere, and you feel like there’s something in the air. And mind you, this is pre-internet --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- right? Right? This is like, you know -- We didn’t send no emails to nobody; no list serves. But folks were just organized. And so I get down there to City Hall Park, and the first thing I remember was seeing the Garvey flag -- the red, black, and green flag -- and the black -- And the Puerto Rican flag hoisted up. And then I see, like, some, like loud distortion hip hop from the stage. And there’s, like, a kajillion people in City Hall Park. Like mad people. Everybody -- 70% of the folks were probably under the age of twenty-five. You know? If you can find a copy of “The Revolutionary Worker” from the following week, or two weeks (inaudible), you can see a small picture of me in the crowd, like, kneeling down when there are people telling the people to sit down. And I had no idea about it, but, like, the thing was a hot mess. Like, I mean, the demonstration itself was a hot mess. Like, you know, like, you know, there was really -- Because the thing about it that was interesting was that they said it was, they felt it was hot mess -- I didn’t feel like it was hot mess, because --

Amaka: So the organizing felt like it was a h--

Kazembe: A ha-- The organizers felt like it was hot mess because there was a fight -- There were fights on stage about who would speak. (laughs)

Amaka: Oh. OK, OK.

Kazembe: You know? And just, like, you know, and there was some democratic politicians who came down.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: They wanted to talk, people said, “You can’t talk --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- this is a student demonstration,” --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and then, you know, and then, the thing that is really important was really interesting for me that I always picked up was that they wanted to have an unpermitted march to Wall Street.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: The connection between Wall Street and what was going on. And that was, like, the most radical thing I ever heard. And then -- And so, like -- And, you know, as a nineteen year old, like, I’m like, I’m still, like, handing out my copies of, like, “The People’s [Working

World?]]” and “Dynamics” but I’m soaking this all in. Like, I’m soaking in all the self-determination, all this other stuff. And, you know, I -- Like, again, like, you know, like, you know, I’m a consistent flyer collector, newspaper collector, and so I got all this new literature, and it just kind of pushed me a little further to the left. You know what I’m saying? And that radicalized me even more, because for the first time ever, I had seen, like, the political vision take a mass form. And, like, seen everyday people being engage in, like, street fighting, engaged in, like, like, spontaneous direct action --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and all that stuff. And after that, I was nineteen and I was like, you know, I was like, “Wow.” And I kept hearing, like, you know, Hunter. Like, that was a big thing. You know, like,

“Oh, the -- “ Because a lot of meetings were happening at Hunter, and this was happening at Hunter and that was happening at Hunter, and I was already getting pushed to go to Hunter anyway --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- so I was like, “I’m going to Hunter!” (laughs)

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: And so, I think it was the fall of ’96. Twenty years old. That summer I was like, you know, I was like, “You know what? I’m going to Hunter.” So put my transfer papers in, got accepted, and I was, like, “I’m going to go to Hunter.” In the fall of ’96 I went to Hunter, and, you know, and, you know, and I got drunk with the philosophy office, it was --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: -- it was insane. Like, the first semester, I had no idea what the hell I was doing. I took Marxism, Metaphysics, moral philosophy -- (laughs) I was just, like, taking the everyth-- And I think I took, like, one math course. I mean, it was insane. You know? But it was fun. And in the Marxism class were some of the people who I became friends with for the -- for my whole entire life. Jet Brett, [Zachary Archie Diaggano?]. [Mark Lessero?], and Chris Gunderson -- Christopher Day. They were all in that Marxism class. You know? And ironically, all of us who was communist in that class, all got B’s in that class. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: Because we thought it was going to be a class on, like, “All power to the people! Yay!” No, it was Marxism cultural philosophy. So we had to read Adorno and Marcuse [00:0:00] and the Frankfurt school. But what I remember very clear was that, you know, this like -- One of the -- I’m skipping around a little bit, but --

Amaka: You’re fine.

Kazembe: -- at the demonstration, I picked up a copy of this newspaper called “The Spheric.” And The Spheric was this really dynamic -- It was very much in the vein of 1960s newspaper -- lots of graphics, very radical language, very, like, open... very open sense. So I knew I wanted to write, and so one of two -- There were three places I looked to the first week I was at Hunter. The first place was the USG -- which I’ll tell you the story about that in a second. The second place was the Black Student Union, The Shield, which I’ll also tell you about. The third place was Spheric. So I remember going to The Spheric and handing them an article I had written called -- It was around the time -- I think it was still the time when the presidential elections -- ’96, yeah, presidential elections. And so I was talking about Lincoln and the

Republican Party and black Republicans. Because, I think that -- There was the big thing with Colin Powell --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- became a black Republican, so I wrote about, like, what does that mean in terms of, like, you know, the claims of the party of Lincoln and who Lincoln meant, and you know, using a lot of [Lerone?] Bennett stuff. And it was a pretty good article. So I handed it -- So I handed it -- So I remember, this is another friend of mine, [Asif Wula?], going down to -- And this, and this is -- You want to talk about racial identification, this shit is fucking --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: So (laughs) I go down to the Spheric, which is located on the Thomas Hunter side of Hunter College. Now you’ve got to understand the geography of Hunter College. Hunter College -- Hunter East was the administrative building, and just we called it the “fool in class” building, right? (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: Yeah, that’s where the president’s office was, all the vice presidents and stuff like that. Hunter

West was all where all the professors were. You know what I’m saying? Hunter North was where all the workers were. Like, you know, and the sciences. Thomas Hunter was where the lumpen was. (laughs) So all the student clubs, all the people who were, like, semi-homeless almost, like didn’t,

you know, live there, and stuff like that. So I got into Thomas Hunter -- and it's the oldest part of Hunter too. That, the original Hunter College was Thomas Hunter.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: So I go to Thomas Hunter, on the second floor, to the Spheric office, and I knock on the door -- again, pre-internet, or internet's just coming into being -- with my copy of my article, and I knock on the door, and I say, "Hello, my name is Keith Mitchell and I want to submit this article for The Spheric." The guy looks at me and, you know, says, "OK, great," and slams the door in my face. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) Lord.

Kazembe: That guy -- And so what my reaction was, "That is one rude Puerto Rican." It turns out he wasn't Puerto Rican. He was Bangladeshi. (laughs) Right? And his name was Asif Wula. And you know, I mean, that whole

semester was just, like, coming into racial congregation that there's something that were beyond white, black, and Puerto Rican. (laughs) So I met Palestinians -- who I also called Puerto Ricans at first, I was like, "Oh, she's Puerto Rican." You know? Like... Palestinian. So I handed the article in and Jet was one of the editors of The Spheric. So I came and I, you know, I kind of, you know -- And we standing in front of Hunter West -- I was smoking cigarettes at the time -- and I was smoking a cigarette, and walked up to him, and I was like, "Hey," you know, "my name is Keith and I just have this article, and I just want to introduce myself." And he was like, he said, "I read the article; it was really good." He's like twisting -- (inhales loudly through nose)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: He smoked the cigarette, asked me that, the smoke did not come out of his nose.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: It just stayed there! (laughs) It's like, "Yeah, it was a good article," and it just stayed there. And I'm just looking at it like, How is that possible?! (laughs) So, like, you know, and so, like, so -- And that

was my first published article in The Spheric. And then I was considered part of the t -- I joined The Spheric collective -- as, you know, as a part of the editorial board of The Spheric, and submitted more articles. And then -- Yeah. And then that was kind of, like, my relationship to the publishing part. Because I had already had a whole long history of publishing, you know, working for The People's Working World, writing articles for them, (inaudible) I had a police brutality beat I did for them, and also worked at writing for political affairs. So I just kind of brought that into The Spheric. Then the other part about it too was this, like, going to USG itself -- Undergraduate Student Union. That -- This is all in one week, right? So it's -- I go down to USG, which is located on Hunter North. And the thing that I noticed about them is that I walk in, and then you just see all of these revolutionary posters. Like, you know, you see Che Guevara and Huey Newton and Angela and, you know, and just all these other things. And as I walk in -- And then, the place was crowded. It's like everyone's kind of, like, circling around [00:00] and stuff like that and, like, people are like, "Where's this and this and this?" And, like, in the

back I see [Rachelle?], who -- Rachelle I know because she had an off and on relationship with the YCL, you know? And so I, so I kind of recognized her. And I guess she had the first -- When she met me, she thought I was coming to represent the YCL, and she was busy because she was the president of the student union, the student government. And they had just got it into power there. And then the other person I met was [Lanina?], you know, who is there, and she's sitting there talking and stuff like that. Then I met [Kim Wade?]. Kim Wade. My goodness.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I never met -- Like, I've known nationalists before, you know what I'm saying? But Kim was the first, like, stomp-down nationalist I met in my life. Beautiful sister. She came out, she was like, "What's going on, brother?" And I was like, "My name's Keith and I'm looking to get involved in the blah blah." She was like, "Here are these flyers. Go hand them out in Hunter North--" "They were for Hunter -- Third floor crosswalk.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: And I was like, “OK!” I was like, “You want me to hand these out?” She was like, “Yeah,” she was like,

“Yeah, I want you to hand them out.” I said, “OK, I’ll do it.” And she was like, “All right, thank you, brother, straight ahead.” And that somehow, that word “straight,” that word stuck with me. It was like, you know a certain some of people have conversations with you and they say a catch phrase

--

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and it pulls in this whole entire other direction? She said “straight ahead.” And I just felt like I was a part of something, like, I was part of this forward motion. So, like, you know, I did that. So I went, and I was just, like, at Hunter, like, doing -- Because I had already been trained how to hand out flyers, you know, and you know, and -- I have I thing that I -- I mean, I think I -- I’ll be honest you, Amaka, I think I’ll be handing out flyers for the rest of my life.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: Because I, like -- I think -- In fact, I think I’ll be (laughs) asking at my funeral that someone be handing out flyers.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) (inaudible), you know what I’m

saying? Because I -- You know, it’s the outreach in me.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: So I’m just, like, so I’m, like, handing out flyers and I ran into Asif. And I asked Asif, I was like, “Oh, hey, I remember you.” And we started up a conversation and then we became friends and --

Amaka: What were the flyers for?

Kazembe: The fly -- Holy lord! Good question!

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: The flyers for... were for... That’s a very good question; I’m glad you asked.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: The flyers were for a post-Million Man March debrief --

Amaka: Oh, OK.

Kazembe: You know what I’m saying? You know? Which, I didn’t even go to the Million Man March. You know? Exactly. And I -- You know, and, like, you know, the Party was not very fond of the Million Man March. So, you know, but you know, I was asked to do something, and I said I would do it.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: So -- You know what I’m saying? And it sounded like a good thing, you know? In that time was becoming more and more interested in my blackness.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: So it was upstairs on the eighth floor where it was going to be, like, Kevin Mohammed, some other people from the mosque -- different mosques, Brooklyn mosque, the Harlem mosque -- and different organized communities talking about what’s the next steps after the Million Man March. And the Student Organized Committee for the Black Student Union. You know what I’m saying? So it was an event for the Black Student Union.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: So that’s what I was handing out flyers for.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: You know? Just handing out flyers for the Black Student Union for this Million Man March. And, you know? And it was interesting, because it was just, like -- The turn out wasn’t great, but I remember, like, hearing a lot of the speeches and hearing a lot of this stuff, and it was something I never heard before. Like, you know, like, I’ve seen it before, but I never had a real intellectual

engagement with it, you know what I’m saying? In terms of, like, as a stream of thought of black nationalist -- Like, you know? And I was like, “Oh, this is interesting. This is, like, some stuff

that I'm grappling with." And then, at that time, I met, like, [Blandon?], who me and him became very good friends and -- Actually, I joined the Black Student Union and I was the treasurer of the Black Student Union, and this other sister, [Marissa Benton?], who is now a lawyer -- very good lawyer, she defended Dead Prez for a while -- she was the president. And [Blandon?], who works at NBC, was the vice president.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: So we were the Black Student Union. And he and I -- And that's another club that I joined, just [out of?] it, because I was just, like, I wanted to be a part of a black thing. So -- And then I think that was -- And so, like, so, yeah, so then they in that and that brings me to the last part. Which is, like, the Black Student Union I joined and then I, you know, I submitted an article to The Shield, you know, because I hadn't really heard about The Shield, and that article I wrote about, which I think was called, "Towards -- "Towards -- "Towards a -- "Towards a

Prison Literature Criticism," which was about Tupac and George Jackson --

Amaka: Oh --

Kazembe: Oh, no, wait! No, that was two years later.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: No, I didn't write that -- I'm conflating things. I didn't write it then; I wrote that two years later. I'm sorry, I'm --

Amaka: No, you're good.

Kazembe: -- just conflating. Huh?

Amaka: I said, you're good.

Kazembe: Yeah, I'm sorry, yeah, I'm conflating things. Yeah, I'm just trying to peace out like this was still in this week, I'm sorry.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) I did this all in one week, you know what I'm saying? I mean, I was like, "Damn!" (laughs)

Amaka: The most active week I've ever --

Kazembe: (laughing) Exactly!

Amaka: -- heard of.

Kazembe: I'm like, "Augh!" Like that, no. That was

two years later. But I think I was introduced to the folks at The Shield --

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: -- and, like, and [00:00] got to know the paper and stuff like that, so. And that all happened within, I would say, like, if not a week, within, like, two and a half weeks of me getting to Hunter and just making those, like, grounded connections.

Amaka: OK. That was good because you answered so many questions through that entire thing.

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) What -- So you were a philosophy major?

Kazembe: Yes.

Amaka: OK. Do you remember any courses or faculty that you feel were instrumental to, like, your development, or... Yeah.

Kazembe: Yeah. I mean, there was a lot. I mean, like, I was -- I studied philosophy, I also studied Af -- I mean, so, yeah, I studied philosophy and I also studied African -- What they call "Black and Puerto Rican Studies." And I became a Black and Puerto Rican studies major, I

think, two years into my work at Hunter. The faculty that I remember most accurately were Freddy Kirkland, who was the black philosophy chair of Hunter, he taught a class on African American philosophy. Had deep respect for him and, like, you know, he was a model, a model for me in terms of black intellectual engagement. Professor Jaffer Kassamali who taught the African literature and African politics and society course, who was one of the most thorough-going Marxist and revolutionary, like, people. And no BS liberalism. Like, when we didn't do the reading, he would sit there and yell at us --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: -- for, like, an hour. He was like -- He would say shit like, "You guys are sitting here, like, eating Taco Bell? We built universities!" (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: "We didn't have universities in Tanzania!" Because, you know, the -- (laughs) the black studies faculty at Hunter, you know, you know, either had -- either came out of John Henrik Clarke or came out of, like, deep nation-building on the African continent. So they had no time for, like, "I got sick, I couldn't to hand in the paper."

Like, they were just, like -- They would tell you, straight up, like, "No brother B's." You could be -- You could talk Fanon and Karl Marx and all this stuff all you want -- you do the work. You know? Exactly. You know what I'm saying? When you take this degree, people are depending upon you to do the work. So that was instilled upon us. Joanne Edey-Rhodes, who taught a class on slavery -- very instrumental. She was my faculty advisor in my field-work and also my independent study. I would say, I would say to a certain -- You know, yeah, those are -- I would say those are the ones who I kept most in contact with who I mostly followed. But the funny thing about it, too, was just the fact that for a long time, like, there were challenges in terms of me as a student. Because you know, like, for example, like, I dropped for a little bit because I was getting so into the political work, I wasn't doing my schoolwork. So, like, in my -- So, like, there would be, like, this typical thing; it'd be, like, I'd drop by USG office and, like, I had go to German class, and, like, people would be like, "We're showing The Battle of Algiers," and you know, like, back then, like that was really hard to get. Like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- it's not like you can stream it on Netflix, so --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- it was like, you get a copy of that and I was like, "I heard about this film; let me watch that." So I, like, skipped German class and watched The Battle of Algiers. And we educated each other. And you know? So there was always this, kind of, struggle, I think, for a lot of us who were student activists to really put both our energies in the student organizing work --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and also getting our own work done. So, like, among us, many of us, took -- took us ten years, seven years, ten years to finish. You know? And, but, at the same time, we had very good faculty. I'll tell you one story real quick, all right? The day the open admissions vote went on was on May 6th 998. That was my bir -- My twenty-second birthday. I came out of -- I was in, I was in the Puerto Rican -- History of Puerto Rico class taught by this Harry Rodriguez -- another guy. Oh my god, Harry Rodriguez. This motherfucker.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: Harry Rodriguez would be like -- He'd always start his class off with, like, this: "If you are a member of the FBI, a law enforcement agency, you have no permission to be in my class!"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: "I do not want my class to be taped --" (laughs) " -- or to be (inaudible)." I was like, "What kind of class am I in? What kind of --" Like -- And I was like -- And that's when we got the deep history of the Puerto Rican colonial movement. So I remember doing a report on comparing... I don't know, this, no, I think it was, like, something, like, comparing, like, the black li-- the black struggle and the Puerto Rican struggle and how it frames a literary work or stuff like that and blah, blah, blah. And then I go downstairs, and Sabrina Hammad, who was sisters with Suheir Hammad, comes out and says, "Keith," like, "they just voted on the open admissions. We're going run down and," you know, "and protest." So we went to 80

th Street and we found out that they [00::00] voted it down. You know? So this is the fir -- So this is a funny thing. So, I think you've probably heard this story before but I'm sorry. So earlier, a bunch of faculty and student got arrested. They got arrested and then they got released. You know? And -- And some of them went back to CUNY, to CUNY headquarters. I got there and me and my friend Todd were like, "You know what? Fuck this shit. We're going to go in there, and we're going to do a --" (laughs) " -- two man civil disobedience." (laughs) So we went in there and sat

down on the ground. They took Todd; separated Todd from me, and... let him go, and arrested me. (laughs) And then -- To be -- You know, Todd's white. And then, as I'm going down, [Sassa?] -- [Sadja Enower?] -- who just got freed got arrested again --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) Which is still a record of, to this day, I've never heard of anyone getting arrested --

Amaka: (simultaneous) -- twice in the same day.

Kazembe: (simultaneous) -- twice in the same day. And she got arrested again. And I didn't find out until later that the reason she got arrested, because she jumped

over and tried to block because the police were going to hit me.

Amaka: Oh, wow.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, the wo-- Like some -- They withdrew their thing and she freaked out and she jumped over and blocked them from hitting me. And that's when she got arrested. And that was on my birthday. That -- The chair of the faculty senate, I didn't even know -- Right? And this has really taught us what a power of a movement -- was making calls on my behalf, on her behalf --

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: -- to get us released. You know what I'm saying? Both to CUNY board and CUNY senate and they -- And she really worked a lot of stuff out -- you know what I'm saying? -- in terms of that. And then, and then, the aftermath of that was, like, I talked to Fred Kirkland and I was like, "I just got arrested." He was like, "I know, don't worry about it, you have, like, an extra week to do your paper." You know what I'm saying? And, like, that was, like, the thing in which, like -- You know, you talk about, like, faculty support --

Amaka: Wow, yeah.

Kazembe: -- it was, like, really broad. You know what I'm saying? It was really broad in terms of, like people saw that what we were doing, and they supported us in different ways. Like, I'll tell you another story too. Like -- Like, we used to get tipped off by the president's office. (laughs) Like, the secretary was like -- So for example, like, we did this very funny thing called "Bullshit Report" in The Envoy. And I was one of the editors -- me and Jet ended up being one of the editors of Envoy, and we did this thing called "Bullshit Report." "Bullshit Alert." And basically, we used to take the memos of the f -- of the president, print them up in a full page, and do, like, annotated text around them.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: OK --

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And they'd say, "This is brought to you by CUNY Department of Corrections," you know what I'm saying? You know? And so any time they came out with a memo to the community, we would just do this annotated text, and it became the known. And there was, like -- It cracked the secretaries in the offices up.

And so then we had this whole entire other layer of folks who were supporting us in terms of us, so, you know. So they would, like, tell us little things about, like, you know, "You guys need to cool it out," like, like -- Like, you know -- Even some of the CUNY officers were coming to us and being like, "You know, I got called to the president's office today. Y'all need to, like -- "

Amaka: Oh, wow.

Kazembe: "You all need to chill out." You know what I'm saying? Or, "Y'all good." You know what I'm saying? It was just, like, little things. People would take us to the side and be like, "This and this and this and this." You know? "They're planning this and this and this and this." And so there was a whole history of folks who were just really, like -- Because the thing about it was that you have you have to understand that -- You know, I mean, like, the changes that were going on in CUNY, people who were at CUNY at the time remember it, remembered it when it was, like, Joseph Murphy, who was a socialist, who was -- when he was running CUNY.

Amaka: Yeah. Chancellor --

Kazembe: So there was -- So these people, who were in

the administration, were much more to the left --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: They would give them credit too. So that -- So in terms of our analysis, we were fighting against the powers, but at the same time, we had -- We -- In the back of our minds, we had to make a differentiation between the CUNY board of Tr--

Amaka: Trustees.

Kazembe: Trustees, who were much more to the right --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and the actual college administration, who was much more towards the center left. So -- So they were, the entire time that CUNY's SLAM! was in power, we didn't really do a lot of direct actions towards the campus itself. You know what I'm saying? And that was strategic, because we saw -- Because we also saw it within the context of kee-- of a city-wide movement --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: But also the fact of, like, who are our allies and who are our friends?

Amaka: Right, right.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So we had a kind

of, like, an unspoken truce with the president's office and the faculty that we would not disrupt their specific functioning of education.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: At the same time, that translated into trust in support for our work on a larger level. And that was something that was really important to the coalition building and how people plug in. And so that's the way I would say, in terms of the faculty thing, that it was [0:00:00] wider than, I think, a lot of individuals -- You know, as bigger than individuals. You know what I'm saying.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? So -- And then you had some individuals who were just, like, bastards.

Amaka: Yeah. (laughs)

Kazembe: Like, you know what I'm saying? Like, this one motherfucker's, like -- Like [Greg Morris?]. Greg Morris, who was the head of the -- Who was, like, who was a wannabe, like, head of the media department, you know, black dude, you know what I'm saying, was, like, anti-SLAM!, and wrote all these anti-SLAM! articles. You know?

And, like, and you know, he was just trying to -- You know, and -- Because, because in his mind, he was upset with the autonomy of The Envoy. You know? And he felt threatened by it because it was no longer his newspaper. The Envoy was a very important portion of the whole entire structure of the movement --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and I mean, if -- I mean, you've got -- But I can answer that -- I mean, one of the action (inaudible), but let me get back to that.

Amaka: I don't know, you can --

Kazembe: OK, well I'll say this story, so, like, I would say that there was, like -- I would say that there was two main pillars to, like, to -- I would say that there was three main pillars to the work in the 90s, right? There was the work of student government, which brought fair and accountable governance to the student government. Because go -- Because student government beforehand was just a cash funnel. Like, people were just taking --

Amaka: Corrupt.

Kazembe: -- vacations --

Amaka: Yeah, that's what people told me --

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? People, like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: People just, like, you know, buying cars and shit. Like, you know, like all sorts of that. So we swept that shit out and we brought in clean government. So we gave the money to the clubs, we provided, like -- You know, we opened up a resource center to be a place where you get free copies. Like, you know what I'm saying? Like, we did a bunch of stuff. And we had a fair

(inaudible), you know, legal services, all that stuff, right? Large selection of services and stuff like that we did, right? At one point we tried to do a free lunch program, but, like, you know -- It's funny about a free lunch program because the thing about it is, I learned something from that -- is that (cough) even if you give someone a free sandwich, and even though they're really hungry, people who have very developed taste won't always take the free sandwich.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: And that's something I learned. You know what I'm saying? You know what I'm saying? And taste does matter. You know? Exactly. Taste is a big thing. So, when people say, "We just have to have a free lunch

program." I'm like, you know, you think about it, the Panthers were cooking -- were probably cooking some really good food.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? They weren't just serving, like, oatmeal every day. They cook, like, sausage --

Amaka: I s -- I saw some grits at some --

Kazembe: Exactly! Gri-- (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying?!

Amaka: The pancakes in the video --

Kazembe: The pancakes and the bacon!

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: And stuff like that, you know what I'm saying? You know? Like, they always served good food!

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: And so, like, you know -- And so I learned something. I was like, "OK, so -- "

Amaka: People don't want scraps.

Kazembe: People don't want scraps!

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So none of the -- They didn't want no dry-ass sandwich --

Amaka: No!

Kazembe: -- they're just like, "No!"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: They're like, "No, fuck that shit!" I remember that clearly -- like, being on the third floor (inaudible), with a bunch of sandwiches that to hear, like, a fortress of sandwich and thinking that the masses are coming to take -- No one wants that shit. So I learned that. I learned about that, you know? Meanwhile, [Nia?], you know, brother from The Shield had his juice stand, selling juice. And people were buying juice, like, left and right. And, like, he was, like, he was another brother that was really interesting. Naiya -- But let me get back to that. First (inaudible) so, like, yeah. So -- And so, yeah, the USG, who was doing this. And then the other part of it too was our me -- our media's department. The Spheric and The Envoy. Christo -- Chris Gunderson -- Chris Day, as we knew him then -- was news editor of The Envoy, and he was leaving, and he left for Mexico, you know, to cover the Zapatista uprising. (cough) I had

written a couple articles for The Envoy, and at one point, me and him were engaged in a conversation around me and Jet coming on board, and, kind of, facilitating The Envoy. Because there was nobody taking that place. Like, both the leadership was going to die. So they -- So they actually voted us in, the staff. So, so all of a sudden, in -- I think in the summer or the spring of -- what was it? '97? -- '98, both Jet, as the editor in chief, and I, as the news editor, essentially became co-directors of The Hunter Envoy. Our first article was on Abner Louima and police brutality, to which we printed around -- A normal run of The Hunter Envoy was five thousand copies. We printed out ten thousand.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: And we handed it out. And it was a hit. It was, like, phenomenal. And then, like, you know -- And then we did also the crazy things around book selling and, like, you know, lines

being long, and then -- It was a whole -- And it was a whole different culture. Because it was, like -- What Jet brought to it was this really deep graphics sensibility, so, like, normally we see college newspapers, like, small type --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- three points, very hard to read. We introduced big pictures, lot of photography, you know, we brought back the dark room, you know what I'm saying? This brother -- I have to say, this brother [Kyle Harris?], my goodness. This brother was the first Kanye West.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: He was a brother who was a photo editor who [0:0:00] came to work in the 90s where we were all grunged-out and looking like all afro-ed, all -- You know? All "to the earth" and stuff like that? He used to come in, like, with bow ties and argyle and all the other styles; this brother was sharp. I wish I had a picture of him. I wish I knew what happened to him. But I remember that brother. And he was our photo editor. And this other brother, who was Kyle too, who was a deep nationalist brother, he was down with Sons of Africa, he stuck around and we organized a photo team. You know what I -- You know, we had four photographers, like, four or five photographers going around, shooting pictures, you know, we had questions of the day, like, you know what I'm saying? Like, you know, "What's the most sexi-est part of your

body?" You know what I'm saying? So it wa-- So it wasn't just politics --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: It was li-- It was fun. You know what I'm saying? You know? And then, so -- And then, so -- And that was a big part. So afte-- So at a certain point, when we had a big demonstration for open admissions in '98 we had ordered a run of twenty thousand copies of a sixty-eight page paper.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: So, and a lot of it too came out of -- And, like, that was our hugest paper we did. I mean, I remember doing an edit, editing for that, we were sleeping in the office, you know, just like -- (laughs) You know, like, it was fun. Like, we just camped out and produced the newspaper. And just got everything in and produced sixty -- And we just wanted the biggest thing out possible so that, you know, it was Village Voice-size. And it really did produce, like, this, kind of, big, kind of, you know result --

(stands and closes a door, then returns to seat)

Kazembe: And so -- And so -- And then when -- And we

used it as a mobilizer. Because, like, because a lot of the reading I had done during that summer previous -- and I think Jet already had a idea about it -- was that, you know, I read -- I was familiar with Dan Georgakas' book, "Detroit: I Do Mind Dying," and reading the chapter on the Wayne State Newspaper and how it related to the community. And I wanted to have something similar with The Envoy. You know what I'm saying? The Envoy, beyond the college walls, touching it in terms of movement. So The En-- So at some point in its height, The Envoy -- you could find The Envoy at Revolution Books --

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: -- like left people carried it, they referenced it. It was, like -- You know, and we published -- And we also published articles from left newspapers. You know what I'm saying? So we actually gave another layer of understanding to other parts of the left. So -- And then that was another part of it. And the -- Then the third part of it, I will say, was, like, the Free Mumia movement, which was really, kind of, led by my mentor and friend Kai Lumumba-Barrow. And that movement was pretty much, like, you know -- We didn't see it at the time, but

that was, like, our specific black one, in terms of, like, looking at issues of mass incarceration and looking at, like, you know, issues around race. And so (inaudible) the three different movements were, like -- And obviously the open admissions movement that was spearheaded by USG. So all three of those movements kind of, like, were, like, gave breadth and depth to the politics of the organizations. So it was very fluid at that time.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know? And people, like, you know, people attacked us; they'd say we didn't have and ideological clarity. And we're like, "We're proudly heterodox," you know what I'm saying? "We have anarchists in our coalition, we have Maoists," you know, and we also had liberals. You know what I'm saying? But it was based up on actually not talking shit? Which I feel like a lot of young people do today, is just start mad shit --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and they don't do anything. You know? Exactly. But put your practice in the real work. So it was like, if I was saying, like -- I didn't bitch about not having a Wayne State-type newspaper.

Amaka: You --

Kazembe: I saw the --

Amaka: -- built it.

Kazembe: -- resources --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and we built (laughs) a Wayne State-type newspaper --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- which -- And then they -- In college, thank you very much, gives (laughs) those resources. And we were saying, "We'll put those resources to the use of the community."

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And, like, you know --

Amaka: That's dope.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, we didn't complain around, like, inadequate race politics. Like, we actually lead when we had demonstrations. Like, you know, there was something around the respect. That, you know, like, Lenin says this, that there's something about the respect and dignity of practice. You know, exactly? And

actually doing some shit? That actually allows people to actually connect.

Amaka: Absolutely.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So the contradiction that me and Jet had -- you know what I'm saying? -- what stayed us connected was the fact that we shared a common project and common work. And there were a lot of contradictions, but we kept coming to the table because we had common work. You know what I'm saying? And that was the biggest thing, was, like, the common-ness of the work. You know? And that's what made it dynamic, you know, and really a lot of fun. You know? And, you know, and funky. And so, like -- So -- And we didn't wait for permission of the left. Like, you know -- In fact, the left was... The left really shit-talked us a lot. Like, you know, they were, "You -- " you know, "You're a bunch of Maoists," you know, we're ultra-leftist, you know, we're -- The Trotskyists were the -- Trotskyists were, like -- Trotskyists would be, like, (laughing) "Yo, holla at some students, [0:0:00] send (inaudible)."

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughing) You know? You know? And like,

you know, and we're, like, "You know what?" And we're like, "Well, fuck you." Be like, you know, like -- You know, "You can say whatever you want about us, but we're trying to do this in the practice, and if you want to work with us, fine." So we ac -- So we actually recruited people. Funny -- True story, for years Mike Pereira could not have a coordinator at the New York office, at Hunter, because we kept recruiting them all.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) You know what I'm saying? And --

Amaka: Yeah!

Kazembe: -- then NYPIRG would send some really cool black cool, dynamic black -- or whoever -- person, and they'd be like, "Oh, I'm here for NYPIRG. They want to do this thing." I'm like, "Come on, [that's fucked?], let's talk a minute."

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: "Let me just talk." And next thing you know, NYPIRG's person was, like, a part of our coalition.

Amaka: That's what's up.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? You know? And we

didn't -- We didn't, "No" to NYPIRG we didn't say "fuck you," we said, "You know, you can do that, but also let's do it in conjunction with each other." You know what I'm saying? And that's the same way. And then [AE?] built -- And it was built around mutual respect. And not putting around a wall. And that's how the fluidity of the politics grew. So...

Amaka: OK. Can you -- I guess, a couple things. Can you talk -- Or, can you describe the -- how you understand the attack on open admissions? Like, how it developed? And I guess, you know, that's also connected to just generally the political climate at the time as well, so you can also speak to that.

Kazembe: Yeah. I mean, yeah. I mean, just -- I mean, I would say open admissions was under attack since 97. Like, when the CUNY s-- CUNY go-- CUNY became majority black and brown. And there was an ideological attack throughout the 80s and throughout the 90s. And... And the attack was, basically, around the question of standards --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- and really what the university's function

was. And so, so there's a way in which -- So there's a way in which, like, what we were dealing with in the 990s was in terms of former Giuliani, Giuliani being the most representative in the most hard-core of this particular political attack.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: So something that Giuliani said that really hit me home that no one says quote, he was like, "We must blow up socialism on the Lower East Side." You know? And that's a quote of his: "We must blow up socialism on the lower east side." So what that meant transl-- So what that meant in translation was that there was to be -- that the contradiction that developed in the 970s, 980s when our capital labor near the city, there was to be a resolution to this. Right? We're coming off of two years of riots, right? Crown Heights, Washington Heights, massive anti-police-brutality marches, that's -- that were going on, in terms of, like -- No, do you know, marches across the Brooklyn Bridge. And so the decision around Giuliani and the, sort of, section of the ruling class was that, like, you know, like, you know, you know, entry in a field of post-crack, you know what I'm saying? That, "We're going

to re-take the city." You know? And so -- And so there were many different ways of doing that. The biggest way was the city university, and also the housing on the lower east side. And the prominent reason you'll find that, you know, they said the city university is what I tell people all the time, is that if you want to hit the power of the Democratic Party in New York City, you hit the education. That's where it's embedded. Right? So the embedded power of the Democratic Party was in the city university. And then in order to do that, in order to break that up, you have to direct that -- attack that directly. And they have to attack it from many different ways. And they were very -- So -- So act -- And so -- And also, another part of that, too, is also attacking in s -- and curtailing the (cough) institution of the reproduction of social -- a working class life in New York City. And CUNY was the prime example of how working class life and proletariat life in the city was reproduced. You know? Irregardless of where people's, you know -- In terms of the thing with open admissions and accessibility of the university, was basically saying, "Irregardless of where you're at in your station of life, you can always go to the city university

and restart your -- and restart." You know what I'm saying? You know what I'm saying? "It may take you ten years to graduate, it may take you four years to graduate, but you can go to this university for, you know, and be a part of it." You know what I'm saying? Say any one of my parents grew up in New York City, they were like -- My father was always telling, he was, like, you know, he was like, "You know, I worked in garment factory and they were always saying, like, look, kid, there's always work in the post office." (laughs) There ain't no work at a post office now.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: But there was -- But those were the institutions that reproduce black and brown life. So, I say the same within the context of, like, an -- And it's funny, I've been to the lower east side,

because within the context of what was happening to the city university, [0::00] there was also this cultural connection, too, to what was going on in downtown Manhattan. So the first time Lenina as a poet was at the [ABC No Rio?], where it was a punk sq -- It was a squat punk commune space that still existed, I think, on [Riverton?] Street.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: And after the demonstration in '9, I went to this party with my friend [Chicano?], and, you know, Chicano was like, "Listen to some poetry, I'm going to read some poetry and a bunch of people." And I thought I was a poet. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I thought I liked to say some shit. But I heard some poetry there that was unbelievable. On that day was [Jorje Matos?] -- fierce poet, Puerto Rican poet who read no Spanish -- Lenina, who read poetry, and Suheir Hammad. All read, right? And there was a way in which the downtown scene that was still very much left and working class and artist-driven felt what was going on with Giuliani in terms of quality of life. Because the quality of life was really speaking to getting rid of them.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: So there was this, kind of, organic connection that was developed. And that was also spoke to the political moment that was happening in New York City; that people felt it in really weird ways. And so that was really a part of, like, the political climate. The other part of it, too, was this, also this other thing that was

also interesting too, was that at the time, the economy of New York City was expanding at a rapid rate, unbelievable to anybody. Like, the 90s, when I was going to school, I think, was probably the lowest level of unemployment. Like, Jet was get -- At one point was working for Vibe magazine --

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: -- you know, making forty thousand dollars a year, like, just doing, like, copy -- Type setting. You know what I'm saying? You know, in fact, there's a lot of (inaudible) illustrations in it.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, and, like, I always ear all this stuff about, like, you know, web startups. Like, you know, all these people making all this money. So there was this kind of sense of, like, here we are as a radical left organization fighting for access to the university. At the same time, there's other language around this hyper-reality of capitalism and at the time, we didn't really couldn't -- We didn't have the -- I don't -- I feel like I didn't have the analysis, maybe we didn't have analysis to make that connection between the need of a

college education and the changes that were happening into the labor in the city. Because the city was going from working class to high-tech --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- you know, and we didn't -- And you know, we didn't -- And you know, we were, and we were part of that first wave --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- you know? And it showed up in all sorts of different ways. You know, around the same time as when I first get introduced to South Asian culture, you know what I'm saying? And that becomes more and more prominent, you know what I'm saying? And become much -- You know? So, like, so it's an interesting arc to think about it in that context. And so New York is changing, New York is rapidly changing, and we're trying to maintain and hold on to this precious institution called a city university. The arguments laid against us, obviously was just like, you know, "Well, you know, what -- "You know, this is not high school. If you can't bust your chops, you don't deserve to be here." To what our argument was: "Do you deny hospitals to sick people?" "Do you deny..." (laughs) You know? Half

the people who are in libraries right now are illiterate. Should they not be able to go to the library? Universities are for learning. They're not job tracks. (laughs) You know? And so it's funny, you

know, and I have to tell this to people all the time, is that often times, a college that you fight for is often times counterintuitive to the actual demands or the actual -- sometimes to the actual needs of your constituency. So the constituency of Hunter College students were four years, the worth of my degree determined how I would get a job. And we came with the argument: University's for the people.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: And sometimes that was very con-- (laughs)

Amaka: Yeah --

Kazembe: Contradictory. (laughs) So... And how we organized our student base, and then how we organize our community base, you know? So, yeah. And that was kind of the context of, like, you know, a lot of that stuff. And just culturally too. I mean, I would say the two -- I mean, one thing that is very important too is, like, just of all the culture, because it was, like -- I think everything, kind of, opened up and it was open at the time.

I mean, I remember being at Hunter and, like, Saul Williams could be reading all the time at Hunter for The Shield. And, like, the spoken word scene was really kind of big, and there was a lot of overlap between the activism of spoken words and the things, [0:0:00] so -- You know, folks like Reggie Gaines and -- And it was last sense of the grassroots working class, like, 90s politics, right? So, like, so, like, you know -- So, yeah, so I'll give you, like, two short stories out of this fun -- (inaudible) this vignette. So I remembered hanging out with [Sissa Kimwayed?] and Sissa Kimwayed was like, "Brother, you know what? You need to get right with your health. You know what I'm saying? You need to come in to have a cleansing with Queen Afua."

Amaka: Ah! Queen Afua!

Kazembe: Yeah, so I'm like, "Queen Afua? What the hell -- " You know?"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I'm just, like, this working class kid from Harlem. I said, "OK. You know me, I'm down with anything." (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: So, like, we go to -- So we go to Queen Afua's den, and she's doing a -- She's doing her thing. And I'm sitting next to this, like, really pretty attractive young woman, and I'm, like -- And, you know, so I'm sitting there and she's like, "Hello, brother." I'm like, "Hi, sister, how you doing?" You know, "Feeling all good." You know? And she -- I was like, "Sounds like -- Where you from?" And she was like, "I'm from Texas."

Amaka: (laughs) Erykah.

Kazembe: I was -- Yeah! And I was like -- Exactly!

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I was like, "What do you do for a living?" And she was like, "I'm a singer." And I was like, "Oh, shit!" And so I was like, "Yeah!" Two weeks later, I saw "On and On" in the video.

Amaka: Wow!

Kazembe: It was Erykah Badu; I was sitting right next to her. So, like, that was, like, the type of time that --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: It was this magic. Like, different folks were just kind of entering into different spaces and, like, you know, that was -- That was -- That was a time. And,

yeah. And so, like, that was, like -- And so, yeah, so that was -- And so -- And I felt like -- So, just going back to political context, that was, like -- So everyone felt this; this is anyone from, like, transit workers to hospital workers to students, felt this impending danger --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- with Giuliani. What it meant, what it meant for traditional politics and all that. And that was the context. And also the context of a lot of comprador politics, like, you know, like Herman Badillo, like, you know, this guy who came, doing a race for the Democratic Party and now is being used as a battering ram against open admissions and being like, "Well, I made it, how come you can't make it," --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and that was, like, the -- our first introduction to a lot of comprador, like, bourgeois--
And, like, having to navigate that so it wasn't just about race --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- but it was about class as well, was a really deep learning lesson for us in terms of our

activism. And we learned a lot. You know? We learned a lot. We learned a lot.

Amaka: Were there other -- Well... Yeah, were there other examples -- So, you mentioned Herman Badillo
as an example of comprador politics. Were there other examples of that in CUNY? That you can
remember? And it's cool if you can't, because I've --

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: -- written -- I've -- (laughs) I got the -- I got all the trustee members down --

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly! I mean --

Amaka: -- all their background and affiliations. (laughs)

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly, yes! Badillo was the main one. I felt like -- You know, I wonder where --
I mean, and it was also at a time that I felt like Colin Powell --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- was being very much touted a lot, like, as being an example of, like, of the successful
CUNY. And he was getting shout-out-ed a lot. A lot, he was getting shouted out. But, you know,
I mean -- Yeah, but, yeah, but Badillo definitely was, like, the main --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: The main one.

Amaka: That's what I thought. OK. So you came in -- So SLAM! had already taken over student
government when you came in, right? So, what? It was like the first or second year of SLAM!?

Kazembe: Yeah. The first year of SLAM!.

Amaka: OK. First year. So what is your understanding about how SLAM! came to be? Or how they came
to emerge? I've heard different things. I mean, CUNY coalition, certainly, you know, preceding
it. I've heard --

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: -- stuff about the student power movement and those -- I mean, so what were your understandings
around how it came to be?

Kazembe: Oh, man. Well, I was hoping you [would write this?] (inaudible) -- I got none of that --
(laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I got (inaudible) five point that I have no fucking idea. I mean, what I heard -- No. No,
what I heard, honestly, is just, like, like, it -- You know, SLAM!

came out of, like, and was a back growth of the CUNY coalition and was an attempt to, kind of, consolidate
that movement and that it (inaudible) chaptered. So you had chapters in Brooklyn --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- in Queens, in City College --

Amaka: City College, yeah.

Kazembe: -- College of Staten Island, kind of, sort of. They were more bat-shit crazy Trotskyist,
but, you know, but still down with the team. You know? Cool.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) You know, they were like, "Go do that over on Staten Island." (laughs) And then
Hunter. And I think the smart thing was just, like -- I think the Hunter -- What the Hunter kids did
that was really smart, obviously, was the decision to run for student government.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: Because what that was is that they give institutional strength to it. Because it -- If
SLAM! did not exist outside of [0::00] Hunter -- I mean, outside of student government, it may
have continued, but it wouldn't have continued for as long as it did, for, like,

seven years. You know, so -- So yeah, and so from what I heard, that was the decision to run. And I was
actu-- You know, and then they won, and then I was actually on the second slate that ran for

student government. I ran for External Affairs Commissioner of Hunter College, and I was on that slate and won as well. So...

Amaka: OK. In terms of structure -- and you've spoken to it a little bit -- I was going to ask you to describe the structure of SLAM! I -- So let me, I guess, read this first.

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: And this -- I don't know if this is consistent, which is why I'm asking the question --

Kazembe: Right.

Amaka: -- but I've heard, and I'll read this real quick.

Kazembe: OK.

Amaka: "It was decided by student activists to establish SLAM!, a new structure that would guarantee decisions were being made by student activists that had a real base on their campuses by requiring each campus to delegate four members to participate in CUNY-wide meetings

and limiting off-campus participation to invited groups. They also required that each delegation be at least half women and half people of color." Do you -- Was that accurate? Consistent?

Kazembe: Yeah, I would say that was consistent. I would say that was consistent. I mean, that -- I mean, the latter part was around stacking of outside groups in particularly, like, Marxist-Leninist groups -- (fake-coughs) ISO! (laughs) -- around how they proceeded with their meetings. And I would say that it was very strongly led by women of color. Very much, strongly. And... Yeah.

Amaka: OK. Let's see, what's a good question. I guess, I have a question around how -- And this could be regarding meetings or just general ways of, I guess, process --

Kazembe: Right.

Amaka: -- but, like, how would you describe the ways in which, I guess, SLAM! conducted its affairs? Because you have the student government component, but you also have a component that's not student government --

Kazembe: Right.

Amaka: -- there's also, because of such a diverse

organization, you know -- For instance, in some organizations, they're very intentional around, you know, promoting -- like you said -- women of color, men kind of standing down --

Kazembe: Right.

Amaka: -- or, you know, promoting particular groups. So -- Or calling particular folks out on their privilege. You know --

Kazembe: Right, exactly.

Amaka: -- those types of things. So, like, how did SLAM!, I guess, function in relationship to those types of... things?

Kazembe: That's a good questions. I mean, I think that -- To me, I mean, I think that there was really no one way that their people function.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: I will say that there were times when we used consensus. There was times when we used, like, more majoritarian, like, standards. There was times when, you know, I mean, we just broke down and cried, you know, and really struggled with each other. I mean, you know, I mean, I think it was based upon, like, what kind of work

that represented us on the table. So we were dealing with, like, you know, you know, a Mumia Coalition meeting, you know? You know -- You know, and going into a direct action, you know, like, we principally used consensus. You know what I'm saying? Because that requires a tremendous amount of trust to put in the participants.

Amaka: Absolutely.

Kazembe: Because, you know, people are about to get arrested. You know? You know, if -- You know, if we were doing things with the CUNY coalition and we were doing direct action, it would require smaller affinity groups to carry out specific actions.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know, if we're dealing with student government and dealing with, like, the idea of, like, dealing with, like, trying to build coalition building, but also that's trying to do governance, we had do, like, very formal Robert's Rule Of Order meetings and conversations and really have --

really be principled in terms of that, because those were the things that we had to, like, be accountable for. You know? So I would say that being in SLAM!, you learned the different ways of governance at

different points.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, you know, and, like, the same thing with the other parts of it in terms of the newspaper. The newspaper had free and open elections. You know what I'm saying? You know, each one of us was recall-able -- you know what I'm saying? -- if people had beef. It wasn't the -- It wasn't just me and Jet making decisions; we had open meetings of the staff, you know what I'm saying? And we basically allowed other people on the staff to do their thing, have their features, we never -- We never re-edited pieces that we had disagreed with.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: The biggest fights that me and Jet had, honestly, were fights over [0:0:00] how critical we were going to be of student government. You know what I'm saying? You know, I tended to be on the side of, like, not being so critical of student government; Jet tended to be on the side of, like, allowing criticism of student government to flourish. Yeah, so, you know, and so, like, those were the big fights we had.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know? Exactly. I was like, "This is a political project of the Student Liberation Action Movement." And he was like, "No, this the student paper of Hunter College." And you know what I'm saying? And we were just -- I mean, like, I remember one time, I mean, we were in the middle of, like, 69th Street and rd Avenue, just screaming at each other. Just, like, (laughs) in front of the (HSBC?) bank, just yelling at each other. And one of our staff members came over and was like -- Like, you know -- (laughs) Like, "What's going on?" We were like, "Stay out of it!" Right? (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: And we're just screaming in the middle of the street, just because we were just, like, [there was?] just a lot of anger around that. But then, you know, after a while we just got sort of understanding and there was just, like -- And that was healthy. You know, so -- And the same thing, often times, when, in terms of, like, talking about privilege. Like, you know -- You know, it was very funny because, like, one of the things SLAM! often got accused of, and it was hurtful and it was -- it's still

hurtful to this day -- is that we were a people of color organization that was run by Jet and Chris. That Jet and Chris were running us from behind the scenes and, just, we were just these puppets. And that caused a lot of tension between Jet, Chris, and the organization as we were growing. Because the fact of the matter is that all of us who were in SLAM! came to SLAM! with some political understanding. You know? You know, I came out of the Young Communist League, Rachel came out of that Haitian tradition and the Young Communist League, Lenina came out of the Puerto Rican Independentistas Movement, you know, Kai came out of the, you know, black nationalist movement, so did sister Kim, Jet, and Chris... Jet and Chris tended to be the more theoretically sharper ones than the ones who had more technical experience. And that was a lot of tension between us, you know, in terms of, like, how do we negotiate that?

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: And so a lot of times, you know, it would be times when, like, Jet would step back from projects and he was never as intimately involved in SLAM! as people put him to be. He supported us. You know what I'm saying? You

know what I'm saying? So -- And he still does that to this day. You know what I'm saying? He's like, "I'll make a flyer." (laughs) You know what I'm saying? "I'll do the publication." "I'll help to guide it." You know what I'm saying? And, "be a political strategist." Chris was very similar in the same way, that he was just very much like, you know, "I want to bring into -- " "I want to bring in account this long history, of civil rights struggle, of deep democratic leanings." So Chris

is the one who -- Actually, that thing you read? Chris authored that. You know? So -- You know what I'm saying? And he authored the ten-point program.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So he -- Because he was coming out of the anarchist tradition, so was encouraging us to be much more democratic. And, you know what I'm saying? Giving us anarchist literature, and it allowed us to be a little growing, so -- And still, at the same time, it's not that fair to be, like -- Not to say that this wasn't, like, battles. So for example, right? This is a political mistake I think we made. At one point, you know, Love or Rage broke up and formed a group called

Fire by Night. And Fire by Night was going to be more of a communist, kind of, cadre, you know, group. And, you know, I forgot what the exact -- I remember, it was something to the effect of them using SLAM!'s material, publicizing themselves as part of SLAM!, that we found ourselves to be very, quite, objectable to them. Because they didn't ask us first. You know what I'm saying? And we got into a really bad, bad fight and it ended up, they didn't do the thing that we wanted to do, and Fire by Night ended up falling apart. And I -- You know, firstly, looking back on it, like, I regret that because one thing that SLAM! didn't do was that we never really respected or really found a way to really talk to white people. (laughs) You know? So -- You know? And you know what I'm saying? So whi-- So when white people joined us and were very comfortable with us, it was -- It required a high level of political commitment and historical understanding. So most of the white people who joined us were Jewish. (laughs) You know what I'm s -- You know? So they had a background in social justice work. But in terms of the vast majority of white women on campus, like, we didn't really relate to them. You know? Like, there was a few white women in the

-- For a mostly women organization, we didn't really relate to that. Didn't relate to white people in general, you know? And that was something that I think, looking back on it, I wish we were a little bit more sharp on. Like, but, at the same time, like, we were coming into our own being.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? Exactly. And growing. And feeling like, at the same being like, you know, "I don't want to deal with white people." You know [0::00] what I'm saying? You know, like, "I don't want to be a part of that shackle anymore. This is something new and exciting." And so those are the things where I feel like -- You know, when you talk about governance and structure, I look on back on it and I'm like, "Oh, OK, we could have done that better; we should have done that better."

Amaka: All right. SLAM! was -- There was kind of a ran -- Like, a lar-- From what I've read and from what I've read and researched, a range of activities. Right? So I mean, student government, y'all studied --

Kazembe: (clapping)

Amaka: -- y'all did direct action, high school organizer program --

Kazembe: Yeah, we were -- We were busy! (laughs)

Amaka: Right. Right, exactly. And so there was larg-- You know, a wide range of activities. What was significant to you about the work that you guys did at -- I think particularly considering this wide range of activities that you were involved in --

Kazembe: Oh, man. God... What was significant?

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: I mean, I think that for me what was significant all the time was this consistent sense of the reproduction of social life in this city. Like, you know what I'm saying? Like, I feel, like, that was the -- I think that was -- I think that was something that we were always concerned about. Like, you know, you know -- You know, like, a lot of times, like, I feel like in the movement today, like, youth is objectified. You know, and then they're like, "Here are our young people!"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) You know? In this, like -- And, you know, like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: And, you know, and the young people don't

really have agency within these institutions. You know what I'm saying? They don't really have say in terms of, like, how things are shaped. You know? Exactly. You know, they're youth-as-objects, not youth-as-subjects. And I think that when we entered into it, we looked at youth-as-subject, and really looked at the youth as a space of inquiry and creativity. And so when you're talking about all these other, like, aspects of it, we always went back to youth and our own culture. You know? Exactly. And then didn't really try to replicate the culture of the past. You know? Exactly. So we -- So we symbolized and we respected -- We had on the walls the Young Lords and the Panthers, but we didn't do the exact same thing --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- that they did. And so for me, like, when I look back on it, what was significant was always this kind of, like consistent sense of invention. Right? And being connected to what was going on right now, right then and there. So, like, for me, like, for example, like, the -- Like, you know, I look back on it to, like -- The things that really pop off for me is, like, that the Saving Little Ones and Mumia concert. That's SLAM!. Like, that was

connected by Valerie Gene, who is executive director [Fury?] now. Valerie was a single mom who was going to Hunter who ended up running for president on the SLAM! line and being working in student government for a number of years. And she was, like, you know, "How come we're not talking about moms?" You know? Exactly. You know what I'm saying? And I was like, "OK!" And she brought this whole other dimension to it. And so -- So and then -- And because we were open and porous like that, she can actually speak from that space of moms and come out with something called Save the Little Ones and Mumia. You know? And it ended up being, like, one -- a fundraiser for the Hunter College daycare. You know what I'm saying? And so here we are, at the age of twenty, twenty-one, being inter-generational --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- talking about kids. (laughs)

Amaka: That's dope.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And, like, so that was a concert with, like -- I think it was -- Mostaff, [Suhir?], Dead Prez, [Yazid?], Earth Driver, you know. Same thing with the high school organizing project, you know? We were just like, "What are we doing in terms of,

like, teaching young people? If CUNY shuts down, can we still have a space for young people to come to CUNY and still learn?" And so that was a thing. So it was interesting to think about how we were being intergenerational, and not just being, like, "Now we're old folks," and then, like, "Oh, we're going to be intergenerational." Intergenerational now means, like, older folks gathering young people in a room and telling them, "You ain't doing shit." You know? "Oh," like, you know, "you've got to do it our way," and stuff like that. Whereas now it's just, like -- It was just, like, taking care of each other. So that was the dopest part about it, and, like -- And not to toot -- Not to toot the horn of our organization, but I'll tell you the truth, I -- You know, I'll be honest, I think SLAM! gave New York City a left. You know what I'm saying? We gave New York a left. You know what I'm saying? Everybody who was in SLAM! back then are still part of the New York City left.

Amaka: Yep.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So we -- So we reproduced ourselves.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And then took leadership -- you know what I'm saying? -- in various ways. And did so in the ways that were very much, like, still to this day very radical, very much, like, very much to the core of our being, like, self-consciously radical. You know? And so -- You know, so -- And so I feel like that was -- So I think that if yo-- So just to [0:0:00] hark back again, the intergenerationality of the movement was the biggest part. And I think another part of that, too, was the fact that we had healthy elders. You know what I'm saying? Kai Lumumba-Barrow, Ashanti Alston, shaped our political consciousness and, you know, sensibility. Because -- So we were -- So we did -- So, like, you know, so we don't talk -- So we ask -- So in this interview -- and this is a little tangent -- but we haven't talked about sex. You know what I'm saying? And sex is very important in terms of talking about a political movement of young

people. And you know, and the thing about SLAM! was that we -- You know, that -- You know, there was that very deep sexuality to SLAM!. You know what I'm saying? And we talked about it, we debated it all the time. You know what I'm saying? You know, like, a lot of us were coming out of

the closet in SLAM!. I came out of the closet in SLAM!. You know, a bunch of folks became friends and then coming out of the closet, knowing -- I mean, coming out of the closet in terms of your sexuality, but coming out of the closet of bad relationships, coming out of the closet of, like, bad food habits, coming out of the closet of a lot of different stuff. And Kai and Ashanti were, like, the two people who were, like, our ethical moors -- who were elders, who were just, like, very much on the streets with us, --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- you know, yelling at us when we did things bad, but also nurturing us. So a perfect example was, like, you know, I was walking with Kai to some anarchist thing, and I'm like, "Kai, I have something to tell you." And she was like, "You gay, right?" (laughs) Like, you know what I'm saying? I said, "Yeah, I'm gay!" (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: And like, "How did you know?" And like, "Kazembe, everybody knows." Like -- (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: "We've talked about it, we discussed it, we

-- " like, you know, "we had meetings -- " (inaudible) I'm like, "What?!"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: "Y'all motherfuckers!"

Amaka: (laughs) "We had some meetings on the side."

Kazembe: Exactly! I was like, "Y'all motherfu -- " And it was true! Like, they were like -- They were like, "This brother's dealing with something, how do we talk about it?" You know what I'm saying? So, like, so -- So, like, Ashanti, right? To whom I have my fondest of book collection to him -- excellent book collector, you know. First thing he got to me when I officially came out was, he got me this nice Taschen book of black male nudes, and gave that to me. Right? And, like, for me, from an elder --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- to a young kid who's trying to figure out his sexuality, that was very powerful. You know? And, like, I mentioned before, like, Kai was very much into the sensuality. So, like, so the thing that Kai would do was that she would just do things, like, she would go to paper stores and get these, like, really loud bright expensive 00% cotton papers to write notes on, and she would just

decorate the office. The office was decorated kauri shells and bright colors and there would be these -- all these different type of markers. And she's a painter. You know what I'm saying? And the way -- And this is -- So she -- The way in which she framed our sub opened up our psyche into accepting this new information, not from a very dull place, but opening up all of our sensibilities. And the thing I remember about Kai that's hilarious was that she had all these bracelets on her left wrist. And so, like, as I'm walking to Hunter North, I would hear her just say, like, "I'm trying to explain to you!" and the bracelets are just, like, shaking.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: And she would walk through the hallways -- I saw her walking in the hallways and walk through the streets of New York was like walking with a performance artist. And that's way in which I learned how to, like straighten up my back and do that. Because she would just be like -- Like, a white person would try to walk past her, and she'd be like, "Stop!" Like, you know, different things and what she did in terms of controlling her body, she did it. And I feel like that's something we need in

terms of, like -- You know, we had this whole entire conversation around Stop and Frisk and, like, one of the strategies was, like, "Well, we already tell the young people when they meet a cop, be very

respectful and,” you know, “bow and do that stuff -- “ And Kai taught something different. She was like, “You can be very smart, and the same time distance yourself from the violence that’s coming to you from the state, and still maintain your sense of self.” You know what I’m saying? And that’s the thing I learned from them. You know? And so they passed on those lessons in a very healthy way. Like, you know, and, you know Kai opened up her house, like, you know -- One of the things that was very intentional within SLAM! was that, you know, there was always this kind of organized -- There was always -- We were a multiracial organization with some black folks in it who were always also trying to articulate their blackness at the same time being part of a multiracial --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- organization.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: And, you know, and so there was this thing

that Kai opened up called the Black House, which was a interracia-- An intergeneration, you know, space for young activists. And to which -- She had house on Bed-Stuy off of a Utica Avenue stop, [0::00] a brownstone, like, she opened up a salon. And then once every two months, we would gather young black folks, eat some food, play Scrabble, and just talk about politics. And talk about a (inaudible) -- And that, to me, was, like, the ushering of that, that nurturing. And so that was, like -- So to me, like, having that, and then -- And having those frameworks allowed me to be more open to a more consensus organizing, and, like, understanding differences, and struggling with people and not trying to minimize difference, but try to be aligned with people of minority positions. And so -- And so those are, like, living examples. And other people opened up their house too, like -- So, like, I was also good friends with Sandra [Barrows?] and Jorge. They had a house in east Harlem and we used to go to their house all the time and that house is a political house, too, that had, like, a lot of Puerto Rican Independentistas --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and artwork. And so you dealt with that.

And then so you open up that space too. So you were in this, kind of, sense of, like, being in this, kind of, always in multiple spaces and learning, you know? I -- You know? And it’s interesting too, I mean, John Kim, another one, John Kim. John Kim was the first --

Amaka: (sneezes)

Kazembe: Ble-- God bless you.

Amaka: Excuse me.

Kazembe: John Kim actually was part of, perhaps one of the more, first ardent afro-centrists I ever met. You know what I’m saying? He was the one who turned me on to John Henrik Clarke. And Cheikh Anta Diop. John Kim. You know? And Orlando Green and that was the student power movement, kind of, side (inaudible).

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: So -- I’m sorry, I’m -- I’m going all over the place --

Amaka: No, this is perfect!

Kazembe: -- I’m sorry. You know what I’m saying? You know? And I just feel like -- But I felt like it was very important when you mention this stuff that, you know, that we -- the world that we were trying to create was a

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world that we weren’t trying to replicate among this world, but a world based on caring and nurturing and also, like, a militancy, right? And action-oriented. That we were always -- The underlying thing about the Student Liberation Action Movement was that word “action” and “movement.” Like, the fact that we were embedded in terms of direct action --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- kept us, really, from these traditional things, from becoming walls. And once the action was taking -- Once we -- Once it stopped being action --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and more taking in terms of that, I felt like that was a part when things kind of, like, went down --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and we couldn't sustain it.

Amaka: Well, I think it's -- I'm glad that you said all of that because, you know, I feel like in the archives or kind of casual conversations it's clear, you know, the fact that you guys marched and you had, like, this militancy --

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and mentioning the importance of mentors and the type of caring and sensuality and everything is something that I haven't really heard as much yet. I mean, Lenina did mention something about -- There were, like -- She mentioned some sort of panels or something around, like, women and healing and something like that -- which I think was important. But I -- I'm glad that you mention that because I haven't -- I haven't -- That's not something that I've got yet --

Kazembe: Yeah!

Amaka: -- and so now I can ask more people about it as well --

Kazembe: You should ask more people about it. Because, you know, the thing about SLAM! that was really qu -- was really interesting that, we were very gay. You know what I'm saying? And this is the sort of thing I keep going back to, but it is, like, you know, these political terms "as-subject" and "as-object." So we didn't w -- We weren't like, "We're a gay movement," --

Amaka: Right, right.

Kazembe: You know, exactly. Like, we were, like,

gay, you know? Or at least queer. Right? In terms of, like, fluidity and lesbian in ways that just, kind of, flowed into our politics. And so we never really fetishized it or objectified it, but it came to it when a level of love and respect of the various in which we were dealing with the world. You know? And then it -- You know? And it was just, like, fights we got in to, you know? I mean, it was just, like, squ -- I mean, like, in, like, real, real struggles around, like, you know, around like -- Like, you know, again, like, we're twenty-something years old and we're, like, we're making big decisions around our lives. Like, how do we have ethical relationships? You know? Like, how do we deal with, like, you know, things that aren't all right between a man and a woman and a woman and a man, you know? And you know? And really, kind of, navigating that social space. It makes me -- It makes me sad when I hear about the interpersonal sexual violence that's taking place in the movement today, you know? And you know -- You know, and not to say this -- I'm not going to romanticize our time and say it was better, but I -- You know, I -- You know, I can only hope for that part of it, too, was, like thinking about that question of mentoring

and how the health of the movement, in terms of talking about it. And being a par -- Being a very -- Bring a -- Bringing your full self to the table was very, very important. So I never felt [0:0:00] like I wasn't bringing my full self. And no one ever objected to me in terms of, like -- Every other political movement I've been a part of has always... has always, like, cut off a part of myself for coming into it. So, like, you know, when I was at CP, like, they never -- They never could deal with my question around blackness. You know what I'm saying? If I was not -- And another type of communist organization I did, they could deal with my sexuality. You know? But at SLAM!, there was, like, if you're a part -- If this is your full self, then here's some resources, here's some language --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- here's some history that you're part of. And -- And then articulate it. My last name -- I changed my name in '98. My last name was based upon the fact that Ashanti had a poster of Kuwasi Balagoon on his wall in this -- in the (inaudible) of Bedford-Stuyvesant. And underneath -- And he wrote the text himself; he was like, "Kuwasi Balagoon" -- "Kuwasi Balagoon was bisexual Black Panther."

And I was like, "What?!"

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) And I was like, "What?!" And he was like, "Yeah!" And he gave me this whole history of Kuwasi that no one can read in a book. You know, there's out books now, but no one could really do -- And I was like, "That's the name I want to take!" You know? Exactly. Like,

that's -- And that was, like -- And you know? So offering that space of, like, you know, not only openly being yourself, but, like, being able to situate yourself within historical framework --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- was very empowering. You know? And a lot of people did that. You know? And it was just, like -- So, it was, like -- Yeah, so I think it's a bigger deal than we -- Yeah, I think you should ask more people because --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- to me, I mean, sex was such a big part of, like, our work. Like, it was just, like -- You know? And it was -- Because the work that we were doing was, like, deeply sensual. It had to be. You know? You talk

about spending time with people, thirty-six hours a day; forty-eight hours a day. Sometimes having to sleep over at people's houses, sleeping on people's floors, sharing the bed with people. You know what I'm saying? It's, like -- So there's a way in which we had a bodily contact that's much different from, like, "Oh, I'm going --" "Oh, let's meet at --" "I'm going to meet you at Union Square and we're going to hand out some flyers and you're going to peace out on the subway and I'm going to peace out --"

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know? So -- I'm sorry --

Amaka: No, no, no!

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly, so -- I'm waxing nostalgic.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) I'm, like -- (laughs) Exactly. Cue the Lauryn Hill music. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) Lord! What -- And I mean, you've spoke to -- Maybe, I don't know. Maybe you've already answered this, but I'll ask it anyway --

Kazembe: Yeah, do it, please.

Amaka: It was a question regarding SLAM's relationship to other organizations. It's clear that SLAM!

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as student government, of course, you know, that's a particular relationship that you have to organizations on campus. But it was very clear to me that, you know, in comparison to other student governments or other student organizations in other spaces, SLAM! was very embedded in the community outside --

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: -- of Hunter and outside of CUNY and had, like, really good and real relationships with people off campus. Can you speak more to the organizations and the networks that SLAM! was connected to off-campus?

Kazembe: Yeah, I mean, this is really something, I mean, like -- You know, like -- I mean, we supported, like -- This is off the top of my head, I mean, we supported two dissident student -- Two dissident union movements, the new caucus at the Professional Staff Congress, as well as the transit worker's organization -- which the name of, I'm forgetting, but -- it's the same organization that Roger Toussaint ran on --

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: -- and won. And we did this in a variety of ways. You know, as a student government, we could do

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things like provide honorariums for speakers, which we -- something where we did, you know what I'm saying? As a way of marshaling resources to organizations. So when, like -- So when, like, Steve Downs, and Tim Schermerhorn that had a dissonant caucus within the Transit Workers Union, you know, we invited them to speak at Hunter, you know, and paid them, and paid them a good amount of money. That money was used to support the dissonant work that led to the election of Roger Toussaint, who lead the transit strike. The new caucus, you know, we did a lot of footwork for them and supported their support in terms of bringing a progressive caucus to the Progressive Staff Congress. You know, in relationship to other organizations, I mean, like I mentioned before, it was just, like, very funny. I mean, like -- I think -- I feel like parts of the left had a very funny relationship with us because they couldn't quite pin us down, but we were t -- We were ecumenical, and we were open to all parts of the left. So when you came to the -- So when left

groups came to the Hunter office, they were -- They, you know -- We talked to them, you know, we took their newspapers, we debated with them, you know, we coalition built with them. You know? So it, like, groups

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like the RCP. [0::00] Like, you know, weren't necessarily that down with that --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- but, you know, we were respectful of them. And they -- We n -- We saw with all the Mumia work. The -- Like, you know, folks like pam Africa and, like, you know, more black nationalist folks, you know, came to us in terms of around political prisoner work. One of the proudest moments we ever had, for me, was the Jericho march in '98, where we took ten buses down -- of students -- to support political prisoners. And, like, that was such a brilliant organizing effort to organize a whole contingent of buses to leave from New York City. Same thing with the Free Mumia work, you know what I'm saying? We just used our resources to, like, organizes buses to go down to Philadelphia and have these massive demonstrations. And I think that over a period of time, SLAM! was very much respected as, like, this community-based organization that was open to doing political work. Funny t-- Just a side note, funny thing. I was having a conversation with somebody (laughs) at the Brecht and she brought out some old notes. She was like, "We're going to talk about how

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you should deal with community work," and she was like -- Like, "Here's some old notes I have about doing community work." And I'm reading these notes. It was like, "You must go to Hunter College to talk to SLAM!" (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: You know? So --

Amaka: Right, right.

Kazembe: So -- (laughs) You know, so, like -- So, like -- And we were known as an organization that, you know, people went to the office and got a lot of respect. You know? We never shut down people, like -- You know? And it was everybody. You know? We had animal rights people, you know, we had all sorts of different folks. But specifically, biggest thing, too, was talking about underground in terms of police brutality work. And talking about, like, criminalization of generation. You know? For a while we -- You know, we had coalition with the Latin Kings. You know? And a lot of Kings came to campus and spoke on our campus and so we supported their work. In terms of office space, FIERCE, a queer organization that's around now, their first office was at the Hunter office. Desis Rising Up & Moving had their first office at the

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Hunter office. Critical Resistance, you know, east, they had an event that happened in 000 out of Critical Resistance, was organized out of the Hunter office. So the Hunter office became known for being way -- as a bigger community space, because that's the way we envisioned the university. And that's also the way in which a lot of our critics or detractors have pointed to. They were like -- They were like, "Student government ain't about the students! They're all about this community stuff. They're always about some other stuff." And blah, blah, blah. And we were just saying -- Our answer was, like, "Look, you know, we don't live at Hunter."

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: You know? "We live in a larger city. So obviously a big part of it is going to be part of city organizing." And that's a thing. So it was always a back and forth. And there was also tension within us. Like, at times, particularly when there were student government elections, "How much should we talk about our community organizing as opposed to our campus" --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- "organizing." Yeah --

Amaka: Be strategic about getting elected.

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly, you had to be strategic. So, like, sometimes you were like, "OK." Like, "All right, we want lower prices in the cafeteria. OK." We're good.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) And then kind of roll our eyes. You know what I'm saying? "Yes, yes, we want more accessible books or something..." Like, you know -- We meant it, but, --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- you know, it was just, like, we knew what -- You know? It was like -- And then when joining people who voted for us consistently, sighted us in terms of our community outreach.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: In terms of why they supported us. Like, they were just like, "You guys are dynamic, you guys are about it." Just -- Much to the point was, like -- I'll give you an example, it's just, like, people came to our office with, like, all sorts of different problems. Like, they were like, "I have a problem with this professor. This professor's hitting on me." You know? Exactly. You

know, "I need SLAM! to do something." And we w-- And we had to do something. You know what I'm staying? We had to go and mediate and talk to the professor, or just be, like, do you -- Support a sister, whatever, you know? And just different things that we did because people knew about us in the community and did that. So it was r -- It was good time in -- It was a time when, like, I felt, like, you know, it was just, like -- Yeah, it was a good time. And people respected -- We respected -- And because we had mutual respect for what people did, we had -- they had respect for us. So, like, the last point about it was, the feel of it was very much, like, Kai -- who was our office manager -- really did run that office as if it was a third-world left UN, where people were representatives of different movements and had respect for that. So --

Amaka: OK. What was... OK, so did SLAM!'s work chang-- Did it -- In your opinion, do you think the [0:00:00] feel or anything changed within SLAM! after the defeat of open admissions?

Kazembe: Yeah. I think that -- You know, I mean, I feel like after the -- You know, I mean, the thing with the defeat of open admissions was it was a long drawn out process

process. It took a year and half --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- for the open admissions to be destroyed, and I felt like after that, you know, we -- Every -- A lot of stuff, like, we were just, like -- Around '98, '99 -- I will say this. There was two things. There was a couple things that happened. 000, the Republican National Convention where we went in with full force with a coalition, with the direction action movement that came out of Seattle that connected -- wanted to connect global justice with the prison industrial complex. And a lot of us who got -- who were there got arrested, and we got -- made a decision that we weren't going to cooperate with the police. So a lot of us were in jail two weeks, three weeks. That kind of changed the tenor of the organization. Because I think that kind of, like -- I feel like after that people just got exhausted. You know what I'm saying? You know, we had spent, like, two and a half years doing open admissions work, two and half years doing Freedom for Mumia work. We just came out of jail. Many of us were, like, turning in our mid-twenties, and we were just, like, "What are we going to do with our lives?" (laughs)

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? We're twenty-four, twenty-five, we're not -- we haven't graduated, you know? We have these work pressures. So then, I would say, around 000, after that, that's when things started, like -- A lot of the core began to leave. Like, Sandra Barrows left. Then, like, following that, Kai Lumumba-Barrow left. And then you have a younger generation of activists who came up, but didn't have that mooring of that type of, you know, institutional mooring. And so -- And then 00 happens and then nine-eleven. And then that whole entire thing was a security apparatus, they -- And then a -- And then the end of open admissions was devastating because then you started seeing immediately the effects of the end of open admissions because not only did they end open admissions, but they basically made it free for, like, middle-class white kids to go to CUNY. So, like, so as it was a struggle for black and brown and poor white people still going to CUNY, ki-- They were recruiting kids from the suburbs, recruiting kids from, like, you know, out of state, giving them free laptops --

Amaka: Oh, wow,

Kazembe: -- free tuition, and they -- These kids were not necessarily the most hospitable to the ideas of (laughs) third world revolution and, you know, (laughs) social -- You know. And ideas around justice. So then -- So then what happened was, that was the base in which Jennifer Raab was able

to recruit, you know, a group of students to run against SLAM!. And in 00, 00, it kind of imploded. We lost the elections for the first time. And then right after the (inaudible) elections, like, almost immediately, this, like -- And even before that, just, like, started to, just, to be able to -- This began (inaudible) to really put pressure on the organizing. So they were just like -- So, like, we -- So, like -- So if I were to do a timeline, I would say, like, '98 -- No, I'm sorry, no. '99, 000, around that time is when we demonstrated against Badillo, against Badillo at the CUNY co-- the Hunter commencement at Central Park.

Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: That was me, [Nilu?], [Sabrine?] put up a banner, said, "Keep admissions open" and shouted down Badillo. That very night, Badillo goes on New York One and says -- And they ask him, they was like -- It was live, and

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he was like, "Well, what do you think about the people protesting you today?" And he was like -- And he said, "The people protesting me was not the majority. There was one group, that's specifically responsible. That group is the Student Liberation Action Movement" --

Amaka: Oh, wow! He said it! OK --

Kazembe: And you know? And he said it out loud, and we --

Amaka: This was in '98 -- Wait --

Kazembe: Yeah, '98, '99. I have the clip; I have to go find you the -- I have the clip --

Amaka: If you -- Yeah, if have it --

Kazembe: Yeah, I have --

Amaka: -- I'll have to see it.

Kazembe: Yeah, and I have the newspaper article too. But --

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: So he (laughs) said it!

Amaka: I didn't know he shouted y'all out so specifically.

Kazembe: And he -- (laughs) Yeah!

Amaka: Damn!

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Kazembe: And he shouted us out. And we were clapping, and, like, we were like, "Yay!" But we didn't really understand -- It's kind of like, I can imagine, like, when, like, J. Edgar Hoover said the Black Panther Party is the number one threat to the security of the United States, and a bunch of Panthers were like, "Yeah!!"

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? Like --

Amaka: They didn't know what it was, like, the attack. (laughs)

Kazembe: Exactly. Like, "Oh, shit!" I remember, we realized, like, [0:0:00] "Oh, no!"

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? Because that's when, like, stuff shifted for us. So administrative-wise, David [Kaputo?] who was the then president, left. They brought in Jennifer Raab, who was a direct Giuliani appointee, and Raab -- from the very beginning -- was like --

Amaka: What was her position?

Kazembe: She was -- She was a -- Jennifer Raab, if I'm not mistaken, her husband -- I forgot what she did, but I knew her husband wrote for the New York Post.

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Amaka: OK.

Kazembe: And she had some relationship with Giuliani. No educational background, by the way. But, they just said she -- They over -- They went over the fact that he said it and chose -- and Giuliani chose her to be the president of Hunter.

Amaka: Oh, OK, OK. Yeah.

Kazembe: And so she was the president of Hunter. And once that happened, we were just like, "Oh, shit." Like, something changed. And then, it was very subtle. It was just, like -- There was this kind of, like, very much open, like -- Like, you know, there were like -- First it was like, "Oh, we just want to talk with you," and this type of thing, you know, and we were still in the SLAM! mode, and we were like, you know, "We're not going to negotiate, we're not going to talk." And then that's when the attacks happened. They attacked our budget, they were shouting us down in

meetings, their press attacks against us -- internally and in the communities -- started ratcheting up. "Why are they spending all this money on community organizing?"

Amaka: Yeah.

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Kazembe: "Why are they -- " "Why are they hiring these people?" "Shouldn't we have a student government that's loyal to," you know, "the student interest?" And so they did that for a year. And then, you know, and then right after nine-eleven happened, that was when the whole framework of that happened and so -- And that's when it shifted. That's when it shifted.

Amaka: OK. And so that was key to the decline, or the end, I t-- of SLAM!?

Kazembe: Yeah, that was the key to the end of SLAM!. And I think that, you know -- And, you know, a lot of us were kind of, like -- You know, and that was a key in the end of SLAM!. And that's when SLAM! -- And then it happened nationally, too. I mean, STORM a year before broke up, so then one of our strongest poles in the west coast declined. Yeah, and then --

Amaka: So it was just part of the national attack --

Kazembe: It was a part of the national attack. And then we just kind of, like, kind of went in, and then -- You know, and all the veterans -- There was a brief attempt at trying to, like, form something and, in retrospect,

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like, honestly twent-- hindsight is twenty-twenty. Like, I felt like we should have put more energy in terms of trying to form an outside organization that was SLAM!. But the fact of the matter is the gravity of us trying to, like, just be adults sunk in. And so -- And so there was no re-foundation of those revolutionary forces. And yeah, so, and so we ended up, you know, kind of going -- You know, not going to say -- I wouldn't probably say separate ways because we still hang out, but --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: -- suddenly, (laughs) you know, the SLAM! experiment kind of fizzled and we kind of stepped down, and we -- And I think [Lauren Maguire?] said it best, he was like, "We became so romanticized with student government, we didn't imagine a time outside the student government." You know? And I felt like we did become so comfortable with that specific position that we didn't really imagine ourselves -- And ironically, we had never saw ourselves as student government for that long. We thought we were going to be in student government for maybe a year or two years. But, like, I think that as the demands of communities were asking us, we had the resources, so we ended up supporting

a lot of stuff --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- and kept staying. You know? So maybe we stayed a little too long.

Amaka: CUNY has a great legacy of student activism.

Kazembe: Oh, yeah.

Amaka: How do you think SLAM! fits within that --

Kazembe: Oh, wow, yeah.

Amaka: -- (inaudible)?

Kazembe: I think SLAM! fits into it in terms of -- I think it's definitely -- We always loo-- And the funny thing a -- Yeah, I think we fit into it. I think that we don't -- I don-- You know, not to toot our own horns again, but we don't talk about it enough.

Amaka: No.

Kazembe: You know? The thing about it is that young activists now, they're like, "Oh, shit happened in the 60s!" But I'm like, "No, like, stuff actually happened closer to home" --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- "around your time in the 90s."

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: And these people are still around.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: And you know what I'm saying? And we're still saying -- (laughs) You know? And, like, and we're, for the most part, healthy. So I feel like it's part of a longer continuum. One of the things that we always did was you always look back to the 968 movement. We referenced it,

we did deep historical work around. We never really tried to replicate it, but we definitely respected it, and we used it. And everything we said was just -- Like, somebody said like, you know, "We're the heirs of '68." Like -- And I feel -- Honestly? We were the children that the folks of '68 saw in the future. So when I was taking Black and Puerto Rican studies and philosophy, somebody, some black person, brown person in City college, long, long ago, dreamed of me. You know what I'm saying? You know what I'm saying? Or dreamed of us.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm say-- You know? And, like, that's the way I like to think of it. And I think -- And [0:0:00] again into the intergenerational work, I think that we were trying to dream of this other generation

behind us. So I feel like we were part of a long, respected legacy. I'm very proud of the work.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? It's something I go back to, like, almost every day, and I think about it all the time. And I reference it, you know? And I just, like, you know -- And I'm very proud of it, and, you know -- And, you know -- Yeah, I can't even think of a work, but, like, you know, there was a -- There's a tremendous amount of pride in the fact that, you know, a group of students, you know, young, black and brown people, you know, made a decision to be engaged on such a high level. You know? And we did -- I think that we -- I think that for the most part -- You know, history will only judge how effective we were.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: I felt that, you know, we did something that was very positive.

Amaka: OK. So now there's only a few questions left --

Kazembe: No, please, I'm enjoying this!

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: I'll tell you, I can talk for hours, I can make some coffee --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: -- I got half and half, you know? (laughs)

Amaka: Well, good, I like hearing that.

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: OK, so, after -- Yeah, after you graduated from Hunter, what -- I mean, how would you describe your trajectory after, I guess, after Hunter and after SLAM!?

Kazembe: Oh my god, let me see. After Hunter. OK, so -- (laughs) So, yeah, so, like, for me, like, after Hunter, it was just funny. I did a few things. I ended up working at used bookstore; I worked at the Strand. (laughs)

Amaka: Oh, OK!

Kazembe: You know, and -- With the Strand downtown, that -- It was funny because, like, one of the other Hunter mem -- One of the other SLAM! members worked there, quit to become a proofreader, and was like, "Do you want a job?" And I was like, "Cool." So I ended up working at the Strand, like, twenty-five hours a week, you know, having a great time. My boss was a -- My manager was an anarchist,

you know what I'm saying? He was, like, you know -- And we just, like, did what we wanted to do down there. We're just, like -- Like, my job -- And it was the best job in the world. I was in charge of inventory. So I stocke-- So I checked the books in as they were coming in. So I filled (laughing) my library --

Amaka: Oh, yeah!

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? So it was a lot of fun. But then, the thing about it -- The deep level of education I got from SLAM! kind of put me in the educational track. So -- So another woman, Stephanie [Campos?], who's actually a PhD -- I think she just finished her PhD from CUNY graduate -- came in and was like, "My husband is looking for someone to work in his after school program in Queensbridge." And, you know, and so what I -- So what en -- So I ended up taking a job working after school as a literacy instructor. And a lot of the stuff I learned from

SLAM!, I brought to Queensbridge. So I did public education class, I did, like, revolutionary young peoples' history --

Amaka: Oh, this is so dope.

Kazembe: Like, you know what I'm saying?

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Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: Like, I did, like, stuff, like, you know, we used to celebrate [Baraka? Martin's?] birthday, like, we had Mumia on the wall, talking about Mumia. And then the Saturday program -- I was telling someone today, earlier -- I saw Doug earlier today, it was funny. I did the Saturday. And the first d-- The first time I did the Saturday program, I had two kids, and the assistant came up to me and was like, "Aren't you that brother that's taking kids off on Saturdays?" I was like, "Yeah, bring a kid!" The next week, we had fifteen kids --

Amaka: Wow!

Kazembe: (laughs) And the parents were like, "Oh, the word went out, like, yo, there's a brother down here," you know, "doing educational stuff." So I would take them to, like, the African museum and stuff like that, and -- In 000 -- And around this time, I'm becoming more conscious of my blackness, and, like, you know, and more conscious of, like, you know, like, you know, wanting to get involved with, like, deeper in terms of, like, community organizing and education and providing a type of framework. So that's what I did. And then, I think -- And it was just, like --

And it was like -- And then, so actually, what ended up happening -- I think it was in 00 -- my first, like -- My job I had in 00 was I was working at an African Burial Ground project as a public educator down (inaudible), World Trade Center.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: And then, you know, the towers happened, and then, like, for two years I was just, like, kind of, like, doing political work and bouncing around. And then -- Actually, the funny thing about it was, it was this place I started getting really in to politics. I started teaching at the Brecht, and that's when I started to, like, meet Max and, like, RJ and a lot of other folks, and then, like, that became a trajectory in terms of me going back into education. You know, I got my masters in education, teaching in public schools, you know, I was what they call a "common branch" teacher. I taught third grade, I taught elementary school, and then, you know -- You know -- You know, 0k be damned, I made consistent work here.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: Well, hey.

Kazembe: So that's the -- That's the -- And that's the long and short of it. You know, there's probably some other stuff there with [Darren?], but that's pretty [much?] the long and short of it.

Amaka: How -- How do [0::00] you think SLAM! shaped you politically?

Kazembe: Oh, man. SLAM! changed me politically, I think, in the very ways that, I come to politics with a high level of fluidity and openness in terms of how I see the world, and how I see political line. You know, so -- And it made me, like, really fearless in terms of, like, understanding and listening to people, and understanding where people were trying to come from. And really, before any ideology, really learning how to put people first. You know? And I feel like that's, like, that's the thing. And so for me, like, when I think about -- When I make cross-over parallel between, like, my experiences at the office at SLAM!, I made a cross-over parallel in terms of me working here at the Brecht Forum. And, like, really looking at people when people come to the door, being like, "What are they seeing?" "What are they feeling?" "How do they -- " "What are they -- " "What's on the walls that

they're ingesting the information?" But then also that interpersonal, like, just talking to folks. Like, "What's going on?" "What's happening?" Like, you know. Because a lot of the stuff that we do politically, it wasn't just, like, this high-level rigid political education class, it was just, like, debate, and just talking all the time.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know? And so, like, I feel like that was something I really got out of SLAM!, and it shaped me and it turned me into, like, a, you know, a more or less good person. The bad side about it too, and I will say this, and it's just, like, one thing I wish we had done better was I think we should have been a little bit more strategic in terms of the ways in which we looked at campaigns. Like, we were very much embedded and dedicated to a direct action model, but we didn't really think about, like, the ways in which we negotiated. You know what I'm saying? And sometimes you need a different set of hands in order to negotiate. And I'm learning that more and more, because I think a lot of times when we do political organizing, the tendency is we want to do it all -- we want

to be the negotiator, we want to be the person on the street. Like, it was in Occupy Wall Street! Like, I'm like, "How you going to do media support and you're in the action?"

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, you need someone to step out of that and be the person speaking on the camera. So we didn't have that. We didn't have somebody who was, like, a left -- I will say for lack of a better term, a lefty liberal who could just be like, "Well, here are their demands." And then we didn't really develop a -- We didn't do enough around developing what we wanted in terms of a university. So it's one thing to talk about we wanted open admissions, but I think after a while, we became deeper, we wanted a free university, and we should have re-represented that and say, "This is what we want." You know what I'm saying? And a lot, in terms of community outreach and research, people are now doing that and saying, "Well, this is what we want." You know what I'm saying? And we should have done that. And so looking back on that, I think that we could have been better there. And I think had a lot to do with the 90s, too. Because a lot about the 90s -- And this is -- I hope -- You know, it's

really interesting, is that the cultural anger that was present in the 90s was unbelievable --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Like, you know, like, you're talking about, like -- We called ourselves SLAM! because, like, slam dancing, slam poetry, "Onyx," you know? We used to sing that around -- You know, (singing) "Slam! Duh da da da" --

Amaka: Yeah!

Kazembe: -- "Let the girls be girls." Like, you know? All that stuff. But it was very much, like, tied into this kind of, like, cultural rage that was, like, part of the 90s that I -- that I myself am not exactly where came from. Like, you know? But it was very present, like, you know, Rage Against the Machine, you know, Dead Prez. Like, there was this, like, kind of anger.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And I -- You know, and you know, and I think, looking back on it too, right? I felt like we had [rapport?], but I wish that -- And we had -- And we really did care about each other. But I think that if we had just nuanced it a little bit in terms

of our tone and how we did it publically and just really, kind of, developed that, was something that would really good. And so that's something I'm learning now, to become a different person, is that you don't always have to leverage your anger. You can use it in different -- You can use it in different ways. And there's somewh-- Sometimes when you -- Like, who you think is the enemy is not always the enemy. Like, I'll give you an example, right? Like -- Like, you know -- I bet I've told you this story before, but, like, you know, there was a Board of Trustees meeting and, like, this guy was giving a kajillion dollars to CUNY. You know? And, like, you know, like, it was the first open admissi-- the first meeting of the Trustees to talk about open admissions, so we wanted to send them a message. So we sent a wave of people to just do direct action. Lanina got arrested, this other guy [Eric O'dell?] got arrested, and Eric Ordell jumped on top of the table -- on the Board of Trustees' table. As they're pulling him down, one of CUNY state officers broke his fingers.

Amaka: Oh!

Kazembe: So, you know -- And so at the meeting, this guy was like, "Oh, well, [0:0:00] just a -- " "Oh, the

demonstrations of the young people.” And I think -- Like, I think it was Jet or somebody yelled out, you know, “You’re next, motherfucker!” You know what I’m saying? It was, like, (laughs) really wack. You know? It was, like, you know, even, like, people (inaudible), were like, “Whoa!” You know? And, like -- And then the guy, afterwards, was like, “I can’t really blame the young people, this reminds me of when we protested against Mussolini-ists in college.” And so we were like, “Huh.” Like, we did exactly that. And so it turns out, this guy who could donate this kajillion dollars heard, you know, after a while, heard that Eric was going to be charged with a felony. And so when he heard about this, this guy called Morgenthau and told him to drop the charges.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: You know? Based on his connection to CUNY in the 90s.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: You know what I’m saying? And so from that point on, I was just like -- And I always take that lesson, and I was like, you can see somebody from the outside, but unless you really struggle with somebody and really know

who they are, you don’t know what kind of history they have. You know what I’m saying? They may be rich, but they could have been, like, just as struggling as you, but made a decision in their life that they wanted to eat! (laughs)

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I’m saying? Whatever. So -- And I’m not saying that to diminish the class struggle, or whatever --

Amaka: Oh, absolutely not, yeah.

Kazembe: -- but it’s a way in which you -- we begin to understand nuance. And, like, you know, and being able to do that type of work. And so for me, like, I always used that example as, in terms of, like, you know, in the core of what comes of a specific situation is how your humanity comes out. You know what I’m saying? And it’s when -- And I feel like something that Steven Duncan talks about all the time is called an “ethical spectacle.” You know what I’m saying? It’s, like, when you see the thing that you want to create come out of an action, you know? And, like, you know, we see it in ’68 with “I am a man,” and --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- that stuff. So what we tried to create -- I think, what we were -- When we were at our best is that we became practitioners of the ethical spectacle. You know? When we -- When we did not do our best was when we became purveyors of destruction and noise. And that’s when we weren’t at our best. I got to tell you this other example too. I mean, I got -- I’m just going to put out as much as possible.

Amaka: Yes, please!

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly. You know? So, like -- So for example, like, this is a funny story, like, me, [Todd O’Connor?], we -- So all this stuff’s happening globally too, right? So at the same time that SLAM! was developed, there’s negotiations in Ireland around the shape of the Irish movement, and this negation of Palestine around the shape of the Palestinian people -- the second intifada was happening. So there was a sister from Ireland -- So we had a deep connection to the Irish movement. So folks like Todd O’Connor, [Carolyn Rohadi?], [Andrew Terranova?], [Joseph Fealand?], [Joan McCain-Doyle?] were all Irish folks who worked within SLAM!, right? And we learned Irish history, you know what I’m saying? You know, I marched in

radical left Irish contingents and stuff like that. Funny story. So this sister [Rosalind McDonald?], who was a -- the daughter of a very well-known Irish nationalist leader who got arrested in Germany, and she was seven months pregnant. She was being held in Germany and there a demands around the country for her to be freed. Todd, a Palestinian sister named Sujir -- Suzanne Amaad, the younger sister of Sujir Amaad, and me go to the German embassy. This shit always sounds like a joke.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: (laughs) Right? So it was, like -- You know, so me and Suzanne and I go there. I was studying German literature, so Todd was like, “If they say some shit in German, you tell us and we’ll know what they say, all right?” (laughs) So --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: So I -- So we're going and, like, we're setting this as a real nice conversation, and the guy's very, like, impressed by us, that we were some young college kids who were concerned about the world. And so Todd was like -- So Todd was like, "Look. I've enjoyed the pleasantries, but here's our petitions, and I want to say

right now that unless the sister is freed," you know, "we're going to start boycotting German products." And the guy behind this big desk was, like, "Ha ha ha ha, that's very funny. What are you going to do? Boycott Mercedes Benzes?" And he was like -- Todd was like, "Well, in my hand, I have a list of seventy Irish pubs in New York City that will stop ordering Becks beer starting next week unless the sister's free." I swear to god (inaudible), next week that sister was free.

Amaka: (laughs) That's right --

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And you know what I'm saying? [0::00] And it was --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: -- shit like that that you were just, like --

Amaka: That's amazing.

Kazembe: Like, you know? And it was, like -- And that's why I always tell people, it's just, like, you know, we, you know -- And that was the, kind of, creative connections that was happening at that time. You know? That I feel like to this day, you know, a lot of people can learn in terms of leveraging. Again, the ethical

spectacle, you know? Like, you know, we're going to hit you in a way that you can't even imagine. You know? Using that economic boycott. Using the community solidarity as opposed to, you know, you know, in addition to the direct action.

Amaka: Right, right, right.

Kazembe: You know? Like -- And, you know, and stuff like that. So that was the stuff that happened in that -- And still to this day, like, you mentioned, like, the learning? I go back to that and I try to, like -- I hope to try to, like -- For myself, as I got into, like, this part three of my life, hold on -- learn from those lessons. That's something I always remember.

Amaka: Oh, wow. OK. So, I guess this is really the last question, but it's clear that a lot of people stayed really politically active after SLAM!.

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: But not only that. It seems as if, like, both the networks that SLAM! was a part of really seemed to continue to develop after SLAM!. I mean, it's thinking just about the -- I guess this is kind of pre-non-profit, you know, industrial complex, but, like, a lot of the

organizations that either directly worked with SLAM! or was in coalition with SLAM!, you know, continued and are -- still exist today, --

Kazembe: Yeah.

Amaka: -- right? I mean, thinking about some of the organizations that you mentioned, Desis Up Rising [DRUM] and [NXG?] --

Kazembe: Yeah, exactly.

Amaka: -- and, you know, a lot of different organizations. Could you speak to, I guess -- I don't know, I guess the continued, kind of, development of those networks post-SLAM! as well as the fact that so many people have stayed politically engaged after SLAM!.

Kazembe: Wow. You know what? I sai -- This is very funny. I mean, I feel like, you know, we were very much on the cusp of that non-profit industrial complex as you mentioned, and I think that, you know, for better or for worse, we kind of rode the first wave in a way that I think, kind of, pointed towards a prog -- to more progressive sensibility. And -- And I think that the reason that we still remained politically connect was because a lot of us, in a lot of our pre-work before SLAM!,

you know, were already politically conscious to a certain extent, and SLAM! deepened our political consciousness. So what it did was acted as a laboratory for us to experiment, to use different tactics, to learn the skills that were really necessary for us to navigate the very rough waters of New York City politics --

Amaka: Yes.

Kazembe: -- and, like, national politics.

Amaka: Yes.

Kazembe: So then -- So, like, it's very interesting to look at where and how people are landed and what their position is. And most of the people have landed as practitioner of facilitation. You know what I'm saying? You know? And deep facilitative skills. Rachelle has that, Jet has that, Valerie, you know, [Harmony Goldberg?], you know? These are people with -- Because, you know, because the openness that we had allowed us to be able to do that type of, like, wide-spread work around political education facilitation. And so -- And I think that -- And I think that also just -- Also just in terms of, like, our own relationships personally kept us involved. So we were always in contact with each other -- you know what I'm

saying -- in various different ways. I lived with Jet for a while, (laughs) you know what I'm saying? You know? Me and Jet were the odd couple. Like, you know, (laughs) like, the very fun --

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: We lived at 7 Ocean, had a com -- communal house there with him in 7 Ocean Avenue right on Flatbush. You know? This, like -- And, like, you know, and so we were a part of each other's lives, you know, going forward. And then, like, worked on different projects together. Me and Jet actually worked on the Independent together -- newspaper -- and then it was no surprise, when the Occupy Wall Street thing happened, he would find a home here --

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: -- at the Journal where I work at. You know what I'm saying? So there was a way in which we had these, kind of, symbiotic relationships that kind of spiraled into other projects. And I think that it was also just, like, the -- I think that a lot of times, like, you know, we really gave each other -- We also gave each other space -- you know what I'm saying? -- to pursue these different projects. So, like, there was never a big thing in terms

of guilt riding or saying to somebody, "Well, you can't -- " "If you do this particular job, you're selling out." You know what I'm saying? Like, we never had that type of culture. So I mentioned a brother who, now is -- works as the vice president of NBC, you know what I'm saying? And we [0:0:00] never said, "Oh, you're selling out." Like, you know? It was just, like, we understand you're conscious. You know? And you're doing your work. And so I think that a kind of wide open love kept people coming back. I also think that it also kind of produced a kind of, like, cognitive shift when we had to actually deal with the rough waters of New York City politics. Because I think that the rough water of New York City politics are very much connected to issues around turf -- a lot of ethnic turf, you know what I'm saying? Like, Grace Lee Boggs herself said this to me -- and this is off the record. You know what I'm saying? She was like -- You know, I expressed some of my frustrations and she was like, "You know, of course you're frustrated." She was like, "Up in New York you have crazy black nationalists and Marxists all over the place."

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? And I was like -- And (inaudible) that she's right. Like, it's very deeply -- So -- So then what you have, in terms of surviving in terms of SLAM! is that ability to navigate those waters, and to learn that. And I think that that was kind of the thing that kept us alive. And to this day, we're still friends, we still hang out, we still, you know, you know, (inaudible) people of mine are still godparents to my child. So we keep it, and we keep it on, going on, and -- Yeah. It was -- It's -- Yeah. Yeah.

Amaka: Is there anything that you have not said, or anything -- Anything that has not been already said or included or emphasized that you'd like to say? Because I don't have any other formal questions for you --

Kazembe: Oh, yeah! I mean, I would say -- And I mean, this is, like -- Yeah, this is -- Yeah, man. There's so much... I mean, yeah, I think I got everything. I mean, like, I mean, I could tell you, like -- The Hunter stuff, I mean, this is in terms of our archive. I mean, Hunter Envoy stuff. We broke a s-- We broke an article that was featured in the New York Times -- I mean, New Y -- The Village Voice and on New York One, when we did the

Freedom of Reformation [Information?] Act and got -- and busted CUNY in terms of buying two thousand rounds of ammunition for their officers.

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: (laughs) You know? And that was big news. A young student reported named [Keith Higgenbotham?] did that. But, you know, I mean, there's a lot of stuff to, kind of, spin out. I mean, we were just like -- It was just, like -- I mean, this is, like, you know -- I mean, there's a lot of other stuff. I mean, it's, like, just funny stuff that happened. Like, the time when me and Kai did action to Waldorf-Astoria for Mumia and we snuck in as, like, a student -- (laughing) We snuck in as two reporters.

Amaka: (laughs)

Kazembe: We did a banner drop. But, you know, I mean, not -- I mean than that, I mean, I feel like what was said, is said, is good. You know -- And, yeah. I mean -- And I know I said a lot, but, you know, that's pretty --

Amaka: It's all great.

Kazembe: -- much it. Thank you! It's what I have --

Amaka: Actually, one last question. Could you

speaking to the importance of archiving? I mean, SLAM! has donated so many boxes to the Tamiment, which has been good for me because I've been able to, you know, go through the boxes --

Kazembe: We were thinking about you! (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) Thank you!

Kazembe: We -- We were --

Amaka: That's that -- You talking about the future --

Kazembe: (laughs)

Amaka: -- you know that was me, you guys. (laughs)

Kazembe: We dreamed of this moment! Because now -- Because that was the funny shit, because, you know, because you know, after we left SLAM!, after we had to abandon -- Mind you, we were at the office of Hunter North for a good six, seven years.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: So, like, all of a sudden they're like, "Y'all got to go." Right? And so we were just scrambling, being like, "Where are we going to deal with all this paper?" Because we were like -- We needed this -- to keep this as a movement. So, like, for a long time, like, it

was a different people's houses.

Amaka: Yeah, I heard that.

Kazembe: Yeah, you know what I'm saying? It was rotating -- For a while it was at 7 Ocean, like, boxes of it. And then finally it was at -- We were like, "You know, we've got the deal with the Tamiment." And I mean, to me, like, it's super important because, like, you can't really put a value on this type of information and this type of knowledge. Because it is a fact of (inaudible) way we grow in terms of a city. Like, you know, I've become very conscious of myself in terms of, like, whenever I put a flyer out, I put a year on it. Like, you know what I'm saying? I try to be as up to date when possible. I'm in the process right now of just, like --

Amaka: That's so hopeful.

Kazembe: Yeah. (laughs) Exactly! I'm, like --

Amaka: (laughs) As someone going through archives, I'm like, "No! Where's the list for this event?!"

Kazembe: Exactly! Like, "Yo!" Like, yeah --

Amaka: Like, "When did it --"

Kazembe: Exactly! Just, like, it was like --

Amaka: What year?!

Kazembe: Yeah! And now I'm, like, I'm scanning the archives of this, because, like, one of the things I'm working on now is, like, like the history of black history at the **Brecht Forum**, and just, like, looking at the events that we've had and just doing a digital archive and just saying that this is --

Amaka: Wow.

Kazembe: -- what happened. You know? Because, like, no one's going to tell the story except us. And you know -- And, like, the thin -- You know, and the thing about it, I mean, I cry when I hear about, like, you know, Malcolm's papers almost being sold on eBay for sixty-five dollars. Or like, you know -- You know, or like -- [0:00] Just, like, just different things. And, you know, this is, like -- I mean, to tell you the truth, I mean, archiving's a revolutionary act!

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: You know what I'm saying? Arturo Schomburg. You know? Like, we take that for granted. But, like, he was the first one. Imagine being the first one of doing this work and there's no other reference to it; you're collecting little articles.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: Like -- So to me, like, what we chose to remember and what we chose to highlight speaks to the importance of who we are as a people. And also it speaks to institution building.

Amaka: Yes.

Kazembe: You know wh -- You know what I'm saying? Because that is the foundation of that. You know? Exactly. So, like, you know, for me -- And my thing about it is, like, whenever you see books around someplace, it speaks to, like, a location. You're saying that, like, we have a sense of permanence here. So at Occupy Wall Street, the first revolutionary act they did other than feeding people --

Amaka: Library.

Kazembe: -- was setting up a library.

Amaka: Yep.

Kazembe: They were like, "We're here for a while, y'all." You know? And when you start having a library, you're like, "Yes." You know what I'm saying? It speaks to institution, you know? So I think -- So I think don't sleep on archives, and don't sleep on it, and just, like --

And I'll definitely say that -- Talk to Jet. Jet has a lot of that stuff. Go to the -- Go to the Hunter Envoy office and see those articles.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kazembe: Jet has some of the articles, like, a bunch of them, particularly from '97, '98. And look at the transformation of it to 000, and see the greatness of that stuff.

Amaka: Right.

Kazembe: A lot of good information there. Lots of good information.

Amaka: Yay!

Kazembe: And look for my old name, Keith Mitchell --

Amaka: (laughs) I will.

Kazembe: Keith Mitchell.

Amaka: I'll be looking for you --

Kazembe: Thank you so much.

Amaka: Thank you so much! I really appreciate it.

END OF AUDIO FILE