



A project of the Professional Staff Congress Archives Committee

Interview with Kamau Franklin

Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

November 14, 2019

New York, NY

[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: All right. So can you speak to like where you were born and raised and what, you know, what your neighborhood was like growing up?

Kamau Franklin: Sure. So I was born in Brooklyn. Yeah. In Brooklyn. At Kings County Hospital. And I actually lived in Brooklyn I would say most of my life. I would say about 40 years' worth of from birth (inaudible) in Brooklyn and then I spent a little time down South in kindergarten and first grade, in Charleston, South Carolina where my mother is from. But I grew up in the sort of Crown Heights Bed-Stuy area. Place called Nostrand Avenue is where I probably lived my first 10 years of life. And after my mother lost her job as a nurse we moved to Albany Projects like in 1977. I was born in 1967 by the way. So 1977, '76 we moved to Albany Projects. And basically I lived there for about 30, 35 years. I mean 25 to 30 years I guess. I would say that (inaudible) but that [it?] was kind of part of my getting [even?] political was the experience of where I grew up. In addition to like hearing stories from my mom. So my neighborhood was a poor slash working-class neighborhood. I think, you know, I mean it had its issues of course but it also had a sense of community. So mixed in with folks, you know, as you know like New York projects are basically tall buildings smooshed together, stuff like that, so you have thousands of families living kind of like on top of each other. [I think even?] through that kind of lifestyle that people would manage to maintain like lifelong friendships, depended on each other, built relationships that were helpful in terms of somebody getting somebody's medicine when they were sick, looking in on people, and that kind of stuff. So people [built?] a community. Which is not to take away from sort of the hard times that everybody faces when you live a life of poverty. You know, I remember parts of the crack epidemic and just like, you know, general kind of like you had to have a lot of testosterone to -- particularly for males and stuff like that sometimes. So, you know, I think all that stuff played a role in just not only who I am as an adult but sort of shaping me politically around things that I sort of came to understand just by observation and just by seeing how folks live I guess.

Amaka: Who lived in your household growing up?

Kamau: It was me, my mother, and my sister. My sister is five years older than I am. And then later on she had a daughter, my sister did, [I think?] 1989. So -- and her name is Kelly. And basically from '89 until probably the mid 2000s it was the -- basically the four of us. A two-bedroom apartment. So I think most of my growing up in both -- actually in Nostrand Avenue where I lived was a one-bedroom so me and my sister shared a room and my mom slept on the sofa couch outside in the living room. And then when we moved to Albany Projects me and my sister shared a room and my mother had a room. And so when my niece was born basically my sister kind of went to living room and, you know, when she was young my niece slept out in a crib out there. And then later on we just made do with sometimes my mother [and niece?] sharing a bedroom and stuff like that when she was younger.

Amaka: Okay. And you've already spoken to like your, you know, growing up in your immediate surroundings really informing you politically. Were -- would you say that you were raised in a political household? Or was that in terms of kind of being exposed to particular, I don't know, ideologies and that sort of thing, something that happened later down the line?

Kamau: Yeah, I don't think -- I wasn't raised in sort of like an overt political household.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: My mom is -- she's -- was raised during Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. So basically her background is Charleston, South Carolina. Her mom, my grandmother, did domestic work. And so by, you know, and part of me being politicized, even though she's not like an overtly political person, my mother, [00:05:00] she made sort of political decisions [and though?] she's obviously [affected?] by her political times. So what I mean by that is a lot of the things that I learned from my mother was through her storytelling. And I guess through how she lived her life. And a lot of that made me want to (inaudible) out and learn more about the world. So my mom would tell us stories about -- and my mom is a very -- I mean I would say growing up my mom was just kind of like my best friend [forever?] for a little while. But she was a great storyteller. Very comedic. Made us laugh a lot and stuff like that. But she would talk [about?] just growing up in old Jim Crow South and, you know, what you had to survive, endure, and -- but sometimes she'd make, you know, she'd talk about how they, you know, literally had like sort of a railroad tracks, like the white part of town, the black part of town. And --

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: How the kids would throw rocks at each other. Black versus white. That kind of stuff. And she -- when she was really young she was in a white-only playground and she would tell the story about how her and her friends were chased out by a white cop, who -- she wasn't fast enough (inaudible) so she got hit in the back with a billy club. And to this day my mother (inaudible) she has a scar on her back from that incident so --

Amaka: Wow.

Kamau: You know, so she was very vivid and sort of colorful when she would talk about her life growing up in the South. But -- and she would talk about later on how she participated in the civil rights movement. Of course I think she embellished it slightly because I think sometimes she would talk about how she marched, you know, with Dr. King. And I believe she might have even thought she was like at the -- on the podium at the '63 March on Washington. So I'm like, "You probably weren't up there but okay." But, you know, but she would tell those kind of stories. And she -- in some ways though she was -- the color stuff really influenced her in her life and how she would make decisions. So my mom is a dark brown-skinned woman. But when she decided to have kids, my sister, who's five years older than me, has a lighter-skinned black father. And neither my -- me or my sister know our fathers or whatever. And then later on she [met a?] white guy and had me. And so even though I think she made her choices based on who she was, you know, liked and all that kind of stuff, I think racial -- or colorstruckness kind of played in a role in that. And I think she's even said to me at times that she thought she was providing a -- she could help provide a better life for her kids because they were lighter-skinned. So that kind of stuff is like wow, you know what I mean?

Amaka: Yeah. Yeah.

Kamau: Like here's somebody who's been through Jim Crow who's talked about the civil rights movement, who's talked about cursing out white people, and talked about how she wasn't down with that turn the cheek stuff after a while and she was more like with -- more agreed with like Malcolm X than Dr. King. But still through her own sort of prism of life choices she decided that in order to help her own kids that she would make certain sort of choices in terms of who she would have kids with. So that kind of stuff was like wow, you know what I mean? Or (inaudible).

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: So it just made you think. And again I think from my listening to her, and then I would look at old civil rights documentaries when I was young. And for some reason those things sort of stuck with me. And sort of like drew sort of sometimes like emotional responses. But I think like -- but it didn't necessarily make me overtly political either. It's like a kid or whatever. But I think during the '90s maybe a little bit before the Malcolm craze, you know, with Public Enemy coming out and the movie and stuff like that, there was a time in undergrad where I took a black studies course and started learning about Malcolm X. And that kind of -- and I think that time period of stuff of sort of re -- kind of re feeling of some aspects of like the black power movement, obviously not like an exact duplicate or not even kind of like the activism that took place in the late '60s and early '70s. But still there was a sort of (inaudible) the idea of like black politics and

black self-determination and black consciousness and stuff. And that really got me going with reading really about Malcolm X and reading his speeches and obviously the autobiography and listening to his -- listening to the speeches and looking at documentaries. I think college was one point in my life where I might have been -- I might be stretching it of course, but [I might have?] one of the top five historians in my early twenties on what Malcolm X did at every moment in his life.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: So, you know, like and, you know, I think [that affected?] -- I think the book probably doesn't have (inaudible) probably not as popular today. But still during that time period in the '90s it sort of resonated and people were still reading it to a great extent but it did, it was almost like relatively speaking [00:10:00] like a life-changing thing in terms of my politics, my direction, what I became interested in, what I wanted to study, and what I wanted to do with the vast majority of my time so --

Amaka: So that was when you were in college?

Kamau: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think the lessons I got from my mom and stuff kind of opened me up to thinking about the world.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: But it wasn't really till my sophomore junior year at college that I really started kind of like reading overtly political stuff and just learning about history and politics and ideology. It was really during that time period like in -- I would say like '86, '87 was when I really started reading about kind of movement politics and trying to figure out how I could get involved. It's weird because I remember I was so naive at the time that the -- when I started searching for organizations to check out I started looking for the Organization of Afro-American Unity which of course was the organization Malcolm started after he left the Nation of Islam.

Amaka: Yeah. Yeah.

Kamau: And of course that was 20 years later and so but I somehow thought hey, let me see if this is still around or something so --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: I had no (inaudible) you know, so my [lack?] (inaudible) having sort of political connections at the time, it just made me search around for different ways to try to get involved. And ultimately I found, you know, some spaces [speeches?] and stuff like that (inaudible) that stuff is just kind of like fill-ins for like [something?] in the dark and not knowing where, you know, where exactly to go at the time.

Amaka: Right. Where did you go to school for undergrad again?

Kamau: Undergrad I went to Baruch College, part of CUNY. Grad school I went to Brooklyn College also. Got my master's in political science. And went to law school at Fordham Law also in New York in Manhattan.

Amaka: Okay. And did you go directly from high school to college or did you take time off?

Kamau: I actually took six months off. I wasn't going to go to college. I was going to be a man and get a job. So it was so weird. Me and my boy, we decided -- I went to George Westinghouse downtown Brooklyn for high school and me and a friend of mine -- his name is [Tyrone Sumter?]. We decided not to go to college. That we were going to get jobs and stuff like that. And after high school I didn't apply to school or anything like that. And tried to find some jobs downtown Brooklyn. There were -- at the time there was a spot called Albee Square Mall that --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: Some of the same -- some same stores that are like just names now. But some of them still existed and -- found a couple of jobs but none of them paid much. And, you know, it was like part-time, it wasn't making any money. And I think after high school I mean I was a little bit of a loner as a kid too particularly when we moved to Albany Projects. I didn't really know anybody in that neighborhood. As much as I probably stuck out more just being light-skinned. So like in my old spot with me and my moms and my sister, everybody knew me, they knew my family. So that was just like, you know, that was just where I was kind of born and raised. And so that was easy. But Albany, although it wasn't that far. It's only like 10 or 15 blocks away from where I used to live, but it was just a whole new, you know, setup and world and stuff like that. So I was kind of a loner. So I didn't -- like I didn't really interact with a lot of folks and stuff like that. I -- go ahead, I'm sorry.

Amaka: No. Go ahead, go ahead, I interrupted.

Kamau: No no no no no, go ahead.

Amaka: Okay. Well, no, you were going to -- you were basically saying that you, you know, you were going to get a job and Albee Square was not --

Kamau: Oh, okay.

Amaka: Yeah. Go ahead.

Kamau: So we got a job. I got a job. And again it was short-term. And then I ran into another friend of mine from high school. And he had told me. This is probably (inaudible) in like September (inaudible) four, five months after graduating. He had told me that Tyrone was shot and killed. And that kind of like -- and then we, you know, we talked. And he had an article about it. And I think basically he was -- Tyrone was a real talkative dude so the story was like a little (inaudible) some dude who felt he was being insulted with his girlfriend (inaudible) to his house. And he also lived in the -- I think the projects was actually like [Sumter?] Projects or something like that but so this dude went up to the projects. He came out with his gun and he started shooting. And it said Tyrone sort of was randomly shot and killed and stuff.

Amaka: Wow.

Kamau: I think that -- basically it's like the job situation and my moms was just worried because I wasn't doing a lot with my time. And it kind of just (inaudible) she'd been crying one time because she was just so worried about me. I think that kind of like just woke me up and got me to being like even though I didn't know what I wanted to do at that time, I was only like 18, 19 years old. I was still 18 years old (inaudible) what I wanted to do at that time. I probably should at least try to get into school and figure something out or [00:15:00] whatever. So I went -- I started Baruch College in January of '96 [86?] I believe, yeah.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: Yeah.

Amaka: Can you -- do you -- can you speak to like both I guess the political climate and kind of I guess both politically and culturally the climate in New York City at the time in which you were in college?

Kamau: I think it was a -- from what I remember I mean it was a little [subdued here but?] definitely different organizations around doing stuff. And then I think as even today's times, I can't remember the years in which the stuff was happening, but I'm going to stretch it out and say from like my [maybe?] undergrad to grad school years, feel like seven, eight years, there would be certain incidents that would take place. So Tawana Brawley. The brother (inaudible) Yusuf Hawkins. And then there was another brother too who was killed. And, you know, these were like either shootings by the police or racial incidents when kids from Bensonhurst beat the brother down with a baseball bat and all that kind of stuff. There was like two or three big incidents that happened. And later on (inaudible) there was also the --

Amaka: The riots?

Kamau: So-called rebellion.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: Yeah. In Eastern -- in Crown Heights which was really my neighborhood. If I remember (inaudible) the time period when -- later on [when?] that happened and the cops came out and they flanked all of Eastern Parkway. And, you know, the Hasidim community sort of had a stronghold within Eastern -- within that Crown Heights. But the cops lined up on Eastern Parkway. They all faced the black neighborhood.

Amaka: Right, right.

Kamau: (inaudible) little opening between [when?] we came out (inaudible) this little opening for all of us. And at the time (inaudible) like [central part?] [gentrified?] Brooklyn now. At the time it was mostly segregated in terms of Crown Heights Bed-Stuy (inaudible) all these neighborhoods were overwhelmingly black working-class, poor, that kind of thing. But [there was this?] opening (inaudible) [all like on horses?] and two or three openings for all everybody to go through. And that was it. And (inaudible) [you could?] come back unless you were going directly to the subway. But it was during that time period too I think with -- for groups like December 12th Movement and obviously at the time being like Sharpton was part of that. Alton Maddox. C. Vernon Mason. Those two were attorneys who were prominent. There were a few others. And they kind of were leading sort of kind of the leading edge of the [like?] black militancy. And at the time they were doing really dramatic things like days of outrage where they would actually (inaudible) they actually, you know, people were so outraged that folks would go on the subway tracks and they stopped trains from operating.

Amaka: Wow.

Kamau: So that kind of stuff, you know, and that was -- so that stuff would pop up. Other -- but other than those times, I think there was always like sort of a seething (inaudible) to conditions and stuff like that. But whether or not folks actually felt they could do anything was something different. And people were just trying to survive in their everyday lives. What was far more (inaudible) people's everyday behavior than being involved in political activism. So I would say that there was -- political activism had a place but it wasn't sort of like obviously something like the '60s and '70s. And also around that time when the CUNY -- some of the CUNY budget cuts started taking place -- I can't remember the precise years. I do remember

part of it took place when I was an undergrad. And during the time when I was starting to get politicized. So it probably was in the later '80s like '87, '89, maybe the first of -- first round of some of the budget cuts. And we did -- and at the time I was kind of just like, you know, somebody who was interested but wasn't no -- by no means like leadership or really organizing and stuff like that. But I remember people doing sit-ins and -- in the streets outside of Baruch. And then later on I think in '95 I remember -- might have been a little bit before that, I can't remember. You might have to check the dates. But I remember the huge CUNY rally.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: At City Hall.

Amaka: Ninety-five.

Kamau: Say again?

Amaka: Ninety-five.

Kamau: It was '95, okay, good. And I remember that and I was a little older then. And probably a little bit more involved in organizing then. But I remember that because that was like a huge march (inaudible) was 10,000, other estimates (inaudible) it was like 20,000 to 25,000. But it basically was huge. And, you know, that was kind of like the year before SLAM! started. And there was a lot of those organizers and activists who later on helped create SLAM! or get SLAM! going. But I think the (inaudible) [00:20:00] at that time it was probably the CUNY Coalition group. But, you know, it definitely started or was sort of a pinnacle in some ways of like a resurgence of student organizing (inaudible) radical student organizing like really sort of left [feel?]. But folks being really militant, making strong demands, not scared to do civil disobedience or direct action. And people with various sort of ideological belief systems. But very out (inaudible) you know what I mean? Like (inaudible) not like a liberal space, you know, people who were professed Marxists, radical revolutionaries, Maoists, and all the rest of it in between. And relatively speaking young people. People in their twenties and some in their teens who started trying to think about how to build movements and to sort of use a spark of like trying to end open admissions and [rake up the?] (inaudible) the tuition and stuff like that [and something?] that people could organize around. And so that was the -- that (inaudible) I think really started like sort of that resurgence of like student activism during that time period.

Amaka: Right. When did you start to become involved in organizations? Like I've heard you -- so you were part of Student Power Movement?

Kamau: Yeah, girl, I was part of everything.

Amaka: Well, can you just like speak to like when you began to be involved in organizations and kind of your trajectory in regards to that?

Kamau: Okay, so like I said this was probably in (inaudible) probably like in the late '80s is when I really tried to get involved in actual organizations and organizing (inaudible) 23, 24. And so for me the first -- after I figured out that the Organization of Afro-American Unity no longer existed, I went back to my head of the political science department in Baruch College. So I might have graduated by the time. But I went there. And asked him for an organization or (inaudible) was going on and he directed me to an organization called the African People's Christian Organization. Which was weird because then I probably knew I was (inaudible) an atheist even before I was really political. But it was an opening. So I went to that. It was housed at The House of the Lord Church with Reverend Daughtry. And so I went to some meetings there. And that -- I would say that would be my first official organization that I became a part of. And there were some very smart people. But their, you know, their focus was around community (inaudible) [stand strong?] (inaudible) religious base (inaudible) I felt like it wasn't right for me when they started talking about sort of protesting Halloween and the devil's holiday and all that kind of stuff. I was like, "That might just be a little bit off the beaten path for me in terms of my interest." (inaudible) but because it was housed at House of the Lord Church I got to meet people from the December 12th Movement. So I sort of slid from that into what was called the [black classicist (consciousness) movement?], which was kind of a youth chapter of the December 12th Movement. And December 12th Movement folks were -- I mean I guess they, you know, they prided themselves on being kind of militant and outspoken and the rest of it. And some of that I liked because it was obviously like sort of Malcolm X and I assume most of those -- most of us who consider ourselves radical in some ways male and/or female (inaudible) kind of like to pattern ourselves sometimes a little bit after sort of a Malcolm X kind of thing. But it got to be a little heavy on sort of the dogma and the strict -- and the strictness. So it just (inaudible) felt like a -- for me at least I never felt truly like at home in it. While I met some good people who I have kept -- some of them maybe 20-year relationships with and stuff. But I moved from that into this group called Black Nia F.O.R.C.E. Nia as in

purpose. Which was started by Ras Baraka at Howard University. Then he came back from Howard and with some other folks and they started chapters both in New York and New Jersey. And so I was a part of that for a little while. And then out of that I helped start Student Power Movement with John Kim and several other people. And also became a member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. And this was approximately '94, '95 this point. And that became -- Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in particular over the years probably became my home organization more than anything. But during that time period I was both [00:25:00] in Student Power Movement and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. Part of the work with the Student Power Movement was that we met with another organization. I think it was called [STAND?]. And again this is probably like about '96 now. Or during the end of '95. We started talking about reconvening some of the work that was happening under the CUNY Coalition work because they basically had a lot of infighting and broke up. So they, you know, they did the great march and then they kind of (inaudible) a lot of competing interests and again ideologies and what needed to take place next. And then after that they just broke apart and there were bitter feelings, hard feelings between a lot of them (inaudible) a guy named Cameron. I remember he was in it in the STAND thing. But basically we both organizations together called for the reconvening of the CUNY Coalition. And then we started having meetings in '96. It was [probably?] at the grad center mostly. I mean some other schools too. The grad center and then later Hunter became focal points for like meetings. And those are -- and those meetings started to build. It would be, you know, first 10, 15, 40, 50 people. I think that's -- for me at least is when I -- at least to a wider group started taking more leadership roles. So I would help facilitate and, you know, helped (inaudible) since I wasn't that involved in the '95 thing there weren't people who had big issues with me. So I think for the most part I was useful as somebody who would help facilitating this trying to do away with some of the old anxieties and stuff like that. But I think also during that time for me not only was I about to go to law school but organizing in the black community was really paramount for me.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: So even though I was interested in doing the CUNY Coalition work or the -- what became again SLAM!, and even Student Power Movement work, which was the (inaudible) People of Color Collective of students, I felt like when I got involved in the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement at that time it just seemed like a good fit. And sort of a rightful home for me.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: So I continued to organize in '95, even in my first year of law school, which was probably not a smart thing, but continued to organize. We were planning for like a major demonstration and stuff like that. And later on I guess in '95 and '96. This is probably in '96 by this time. We were planning for a major demonstration. And although this was not -- it's not as huge as like the -- what happened the previous year, we got about 2,000 or 3,000 people to come and we did like a demonstration, a march, and stuff like that. So it was good numbers and that really set the seeds for continuing conversations on next steps. And I think it was actually during that time period after the rally where I decided that I needed to pull back because I think I got my law school grades and I think I did decent but I was like, "You know what, if I'm going to do this I need to commit myself to it." So I pulled back particularly out of SLAM!. So I (inaudible) like I'm a founder of SLAM!. But I think a lot of the -- and it's probably -- I mean some of it is accurate. But I think the really hard work of building the organization probably took place '97, '98 and even though again I was around and participated, I think I was not as active in some of the later meetings. And particularly again I started becoming more of a (inaudible) more of a representative of [let's say?] of MXGM to SLAM! than I was an actual SLAM! member. Even though I guess the first generation of SLAM! folks I got to know well and again people who I know to this day and stuff like that. And I have a few regrets about that I think (inaudible) I think we had opportunity [to?] build across [sort of?] like racial lines and to do some strong -- and, you know, I think they did do a lot of this. But I think the sort of ability to keep a movement going. I think by no means, you know, I could have done this alone but I think I could have helped contribute a little bit more to that. If I'd stuck around a little bit longer. But I think at that time period I was really more just focused in on what I should be doing in terms of the black community and of course law school.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: And so that took me out of that arena and stuff like that.

Amaka: So who would you say that first -- because you just mentioned like that first generation of SLAM! folks. Who would you say was -- who are some [00:30:00] people that were in that first generation?

Kamau: I would say people who (inaudible) I remember (inaudible) close to. Lenina Nadal. Sandra Barros. There's a Christopher Gunderson who's now teaching. There's Jed of course. I can't remember Jed's last name.

Amaka: Brandt.

Kamau: I would say John Kim. And I would -- this dude Cameron. There were people. Oona Chatterjee I guess who's Indian who helped later on start Make the Road. [I think they stuck around?]. And I think -- and at least that early stage I don't think there were a lot of black organizers. There were like quote, unquote people of color.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: But again not a lot of black organizers. So again I was like, "Hmm, do I really want to be in this space?" That kind of thing.

Amaka: Right. Right.

Kamau: But later on I would say in sort of maybe even reformation or as they kind of became Hunter-centered a lot more black organizers got involved and I think during that time period in particular people like Ashanti Alston and Kai Barrow were really instrumental I think in helping folks develop and defining their politics and being -- sort of being like elders let's say who were great for bouncing things off and bouncing and being there. Another thing I should say that also happened in '95 which was huge of course was Mumia's death warrant being signed.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: And that was a catalyst too that brought together not only the students but -- and at that time the various kind of again black nationalists or black power formations. The white left groups. So that for a while became like the dominant kind of organizing thing was to work around Mumia. And again I think that also brought together the CUNY students with like this larger -- again not that they didn't already have connections to them. But I think that close working relationships developed more out of that. And Hunter again started to become a place where folks started to meet and do a lot of work from. And I think Rachel LaForest, she might have been a little later, but she was kind of like close. Not like part of the initial but close to that -- to some of those. She's biracial. I think she considers herself black, whatever (inaudible) people who (inaudible).

Amaka: She does, she does. Yeah.

Kamau: I think she said that. I don't want to say that she calls herself biracial. I'm sorry.

Amaka: No, you're good, you're good.

Kamau: Okay. But I'm trying to think. Later on people like Kazembe got involved. Again at Hunter College. Some other folks. And [if he was involved the older guy I just maybe not -- did?] not necessarily know him well (inaudible) remembering him. But that would be some of the other main players I would say I can remember sort of clearly.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: (inaudible) years ago. So --

Amaka: Yeah yeah yeah, yeah, that's a lot. That's -- you're remembering fine. I'm just trying to like, you know, for me it's -- I've talked to a lot of people. And it's like I always try to ask, you know, who people remember in terms of being that core. Because, you know, every now and then I come across, you know, new names. And I'm like, "Oh. I need to contact, you know, these other people that I haven't heard of yet." But that's, you know, what you said is pretty consistent with people that I've talked to.

Kamau: Yeah. There's a white guy, trying to remember his name. He's like -- he does some writing now too. He was kind of like in and out (inaudible) not a good description. But his name is escaping me so I can't give you more.

Amaka: Okay, that's cool.

Kamau: But yeah, okay.

Amaka: Can you speak a little bit? Because I haven't had a lot of people speak to Student Power Movement in terms of, you know, it was different of course than SLAM! and coming before SLAM!. Can you talk about like how Student Power Movement came together? And what -- I mean do you see a relationship between Student Power Movement and the CUNY Coalition? Like the CUNY Coalition I know was I guess bigger than the Student Power Movement. So I don't know if it would be right to say that it came out of that. But can you just kind of speak to the development of that and if there's a relationship, if you see a relationship between the two?

Kamau: I mean I remember when I got involved in the student activism too [00:35:00] after a while. I started -- again I started to feel that like where's the space for either black folks or students of color, stuff like that.

And me and a good friend of mine who I did some other work with, we did a freedom school at NYU at one point. His name is like [Mitch Austin?]. And some of the people who were in Student Power Movement (inaudible) John Kim, Mitch Austin, this guy named [Maury Dunn?]. Again Sandra, Lenina, [Shapir?] was part of it. And a few other people. Stephanie Campos. A few other people. So I think through going to meetings and stuff like that I started thinking about organizing a (inaudible) [people call it a slash?] black collective. Probably at that time more black collective. But I met John and somebody else. And even though they didn't have a full organization (inaudible) he had buttons already printed (inaudible) called the Student Power Movement (inaudible) oh, I'm sorry. And Orlando Green (inaudible) the CUNY (inaudible) he was -- and he was part of the new black -- not the New Black Panther Party (inaudible) Black Panther Coalition or something like that. But anyway so we started meeting. And the idea was just literally like we need to have a space for again people of color, black organizers to meet outside of just the CUNY Coalition as I said. And talk about our own particular interests. Maybe to do community organizing that we were interested in that was outside of this open admissions, that kind of thing. So how could we try to at least see if we could relate from (inaudible) campus to community? And students from Baruch, Hunter, City College were involved. And we became a pretty close-knit kind of collective. Developed, you know, a mission statement and all that kind of stuff. And started doing some community food programming. Again helped with forming the actual SLAM!, what became SLAM! post the CUNY Coalition. So I'd say a lot of the members were already involved in that student activism at the time. And we all came together and tried to figure out -- I don't -- I think one of the sort of disadvantages, things that was never completely -- we never completely figured out was like what was this collection of again students of color, like who did come from different places, it wasn't like just because we're all (inaudible) color we all have the same experiences and stuff like that. I think we all understood, you know, experiences and understood (inaudible) radical politics. But I think, you know, obviously environment and reading and all that kind of stuff makes your focus different. So I think one of our issues that we could never kind of really really really hard-core sort of pinpoint what areas that we wanted to work in. You know, we -- and also we did of course Mumia work and we also did some police brutality work I would say. And/or anti (inaudible) anti-police brutality work. So I would say a lot of the student power folks played leading roles in developing (inaudible) sort of the (inaudible) of SLAM! in terms of the CUNY Coalition (inaudible) later on developing SLAM!. And some of that was strategic and some of that was happenstance (inaudible) so I think that -- I think all of that -- I think Student Power Movement played a significant role during that time period in terms of helping to build those coalitions. But I think where student -- and it lasted for a while. And even after I left I tried to somehow merge, intermerge with MXGM (inaudible) just the overlapping ideological points of view were -- and I think some of it was because I probably played a big role in writing the mission statement at the time. So it was probably a lot of stuff around community and self-determination and organizing and all that kind of stuff and overlap (inaudible) MXG stuff. But I think people wanted to keep a separate identity. And so it lasted for a little while even after I decided to leave. But I think basically after a while folks who were really active still stayed with SLAM! and continued to organize through SLAM!.

Amaka: How would you describe the political ideology of SLAM!?

Kamau: I would consider SLAM! sort of anti-imperialist left -- yeah. Left organization. I don't think it was -- although I think a lot of Marxists were part of SLAM! I don't think its ideology was overtly or strictly Marxist. [00:40:00] I think it believed in direct action. I don't think it was particularly committed to quote, unquote nonviolence but obviously the tactic of nonviolent direct action helped sway as it does with every -- most organizations. Everybody, right, in the United States, it's just what you employ here. So I think -- but I think I would call it left direct action-orientated. Focused on school and community. And I think -- and -- yeah, and I think just a hodgepodge of different types of left ideological ideas.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: Yeah.

Amaka: Okay. And you've already spoken a little bit to kind of SLAM! demographically. Can you speak more? I guess like how would you describe the demographics of SLAM! and particularly in regards to like leadership?

Kamau: I think SLAM! tried to make sure that it was people of color leadership played a big role. Even though I think that a lot of the left forces even in New York among sort of the student world were white. I think folks of color sort of stepped up and, you know, you have that sort of -- that mixture of things where you have white folks who are political who are trying to be careful of not being seen as anti -- not being seen as like racist and being anti-racist in their ideology and stuff like that. So I think there was a lot of room for a

sort of broad category of what it means to be people of color, right? So, you know, what I mean by that is (inaudible) people like Colombians who -- to other like Latino folks and black folks and Indian folks. That kind of thing. Were very broad in terms of what the definition of people of color can be. Because I think we had some discussions about this at times. You know, someone from Colombia, you know, whose heritage is probably mostly Spanish in terms of Spain so, you know, just because you're (inaudible) [latino?] doesn't necessarily mean that you're also a person of color, you know, doesn't mean that you don't have a place in the movement (inaudible) of course but it -- but that term sometimes is so broad that a lot of people kind of fit under it. And [they?] make a niche of it. And I'm not sure if I see an advantage of it and stuff like that except that a lot of people get to say they're people of color when they may not be. And that's a personal recollection -- reflection. Just --

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: But I feel like even with that said that the leadership was broad in terms of women being leaders and of people of color. I think that ideologically speaking people who were (inaudible) the most ideologically developed I would say some of that were like the younger white males. People like a Jed and a Christopher Gunderson who I think has longtime sort of Marxist sort of like Marxist in their histories even as young people. Again like longtime experiences organizing. They were, you know, very well-read and ideologically rounded and could express themselves well in terms of the doctrines and things that they believed. So I think that played a role in terms of influence. And then, you know, and they were also dedicated and stuff like that. So but I think they sometimes took the lead. I think could (inaudible) they take the lead, I mean that they would be more vocal and I think could express ideas that some people were not comfortable with expressing and -- but I do think the people of color leadership, people like Sandra and Lenina had history studying and [later might even?] (inaudible) stuff like that. But there were other folks who -- people like [Horda?] and other folks and [Stan?] who were also very political and very politicized. I was probably by that time very politicized but not having sort of a formal -- again I was, you know, ideologically speaking (inaudible) very [straight-edged?] (inaudible) whatever but it's a little bit of a hodgepodge so I probably was well-read in terms of different areas but not like what was it -- what would you call it, like a mile wide and an inch deep kind of thing. So I understood stuff from a wide array of things but my focus was probably [00:45:00] more sort of history of black power movement and stuff like that. But anyway so that I think later on again when Kai and Ashanti got involved I think they really added a certain layer of ideological development from people who were again part of the Black Panther movement, particularly Ashanti, who was a Black Panther Party member. I don't think Kai was ever formally a Black Panther Party member but her husband was. And she was also part of -- she might have even been a family member of Malcolm X and RNA folks (inaudible) like the New Afrikan ideology. And she was -- is and, you know, a black feminist. And I think she always considered herself a queer even during that time when she was in a relationship with Ashanti. So she brought -- I would say she and Ashanti, they -- and Ashanti being also an anarchist in his ideological viewpoint. So they brought I would say such a wide-ranging sort of intellectual mix into the group. And then they were also sort of parent-like figures. But in a good way. Not like in an oppressive do what I say kind of way but in a really helpful and healthy dynamic that allowed for like debate and discussion and all that kind of stuff. I think they also -- I think they when they got involved helped flower and helped to -- helped -- really helped people develop politically. Not just folks of color but like anybody who came close to them during that time period. I mean they were really good influences during that time. If I have any -- not that you asked -- sort of had any particular -- just might be that they, particularly Ashanti, and if you speak to him you can let him know I said this, they -- intellectually he was great and would participate in things but I think his anarchism kept him from being kind of like as involved day to day as -- because he kind of was pulling away from certain structures and stuff like that. So but in general I think they were great influences.

Amaka: What was -- so STAND is an acronym, right?

Kamau: I think it's students standing against -- I don't remember. Yeah, but it is an acronym. Yeah.

Amaka: Okay. Okay. I'm going to look it up. I'm going to pay attention to that when I'm going through all these papers from that era. Okay.

Kamau: Oona -- have you got Oona's number (inaudible) can contact her? She might be -- she's like one of the people I know who from STAND might be around.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: In New York and active and stuff like that. So she might be a good person to contact or try to contact.

Amaka: Who's -- Sandra Barros?

Kamau: (inaudible) that period (inaudible) no. Her name is Oona.

Amaka: Oh, Oona. Okay.

Kamau: She helped start Make the Road by Walking.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: Yeah. So I mean definitely for that STAND stuff. How she -- how much she was involved later on in terms of once it became SLAM! I'm not that -- I don't think she was heavily involved. I think she was at that stage also in law school and starting -- and then beginning to start the Make the Road thing. I think in the early stages she might have some recollections.

Amaka: Okay. Okay. And what -- so what was -- so SLAM! is, you know, embedded in this kind of -- it seems like just a rich network of different organizations at the time. And, you know, my dissertation is more focused on looking at kind of, you know, part of it is kind of resistance to both open admissions retrenchment and affirmative action retrenchment across the country. I'm trying to look at the Bay Area as well and kind of Berkeley and folks that are involved in anti-Prop. 209 stuff and some folks that were STORM-related. But I'm really I think for, you know, maybe for a future project, because I can't do it for my dissertation, I'm just really interested in kind of this moment in New York when there's all this activity. There's clearly student-related activity. And you've spoken to like a number of organizations. But then there's also like you were saying MXG and there's, you know, other -- it's just a time in which a lot of organizations are kind of emerging. And so the networks just seem very rich and folks seem to be, you know, in relationship to each other and coalition with each other to a certain extent. So what was -- I guess this is kind of a weird question. But like what -- how was -- how do you feel like SLAM! was perceived I guess not necessarily by the student body at Hunter but I'm guessing by kind of the other organizations that SLAM! was in relationship to? And yeah, just kind of like that [00:50:00] network. Like how did people perceive SLAM!?

Kamau: I think SLAM! became a focal point particularly for obviously like the student movement like you're saying like open admissions. You know, even I think while it was centering itself at Hunter and trying different strategies. Like I said like folks from different CUNY schools considered themselves SLAM!.

Amaka: Right.

Kamau: I think they tried at one point (inaudible) chapters at different schools. And all those relationships that were built like post the -- again the CUNY Coalition. And then going moving into SLAM! all those -- I think SLAM! was helpful in [obviously attempting to?] sort of rebuild those -- some of those relationships and networks. And I think it became like a focal point for particularly students but not just students, right? For a lot of political activity. And (inaudible) [around?] SLAM! ran for student government and actually had resources at Hunter. So they had a place where you could have meetings. They had places where you could do community events. Everything from concerts to obviously town hall meetings. They could get buses to go to (inaudible) for a Mumia rally or to go to Times Square for something. So they became kind of like a really (inaudible) in terms of the networks that had been organized (inaudible) city and again everything from like -- from a black militant to black left to white left. Maybe even just some liberal groups and stuff like that related to SLAM! and the work they were doing. And the people in CUNY administration considered SLAM! a threat. I mean there's no doubt about that. There's no doubt that I think, you know, the city, you know, after a while was, you know, watching (inaudible) and just taking [account into?] the action (inaudible) I think they did direct action [included?] like, you know, busting into the CUNY president's office or interrupting a board of trustees meeting and all that kind of stuff. So they were kind of obviously, you know, well-known in the activist and student worlds. And they provided services for students at Hunter. So they were sort of like well-known in that way. But also again considered somewhat of a sort of an issue for CUNY administrators and (inaudible) and the larger city at times and stuff like that. And also SLAM! folks heavily participated in -- I think it was the Republican convention, I think in Philadelphia.

Amaka: Yeah.

Kamau: Because I went to that. Which (inaudible) basically in, you know, they -- again they helped do trainings in CD, had trainings on CD. And (inaudible) and different things. And (inaudible) and I think that spread. So even when, you know, like a first or second [generation? iteration?] of SLAM! was not as active or as prominent, they still -- some of the remnants sort of like folks learned from that or would use them as a guide. And later on when -- I think when they had the Democratic thing in New York or whatever they -- that was kind of like some SLAM! remnants who participated in that too. So I think their activism. And even the style of we're willing to get arrested for it played a prominent role particularly during that time period of really kind of pushing things (inaudible) so let's not just do the same boring demonstration march thing. But let's tag that on to trying to do a CD. Or let's take control of some resources by talking about

the work that we do in running people for the student government and stuff like that. And, you know, and again actually winning. So, you know, it was a controlled experiment (inaudible) controlled way like SLAM! mattered because it sort of reached beyond just doing demonstrations. But like you said the networking (inaudible) resources and sort of redistributed to do different work in the community and on campus. The way in which it helped bring the different groups together. And the sort of myriad of ways in which it became sort of a logical place for different folks to come around each other and learn and grow I think was like extremely important. And actually a lot of SLAM! people (inaudible) sometimes how people talk on Facebook, there's a lot -- there's these little discussions about oh, if we only did this (inaudible) better or that better. Which is probably, you know, all true and stuff in a lot of ways. But, you know, for that time period I think and particularly on the east coast, you know, they -- and after a while I think there was an attempt to get some relationships going with a lot of the west [00:55:00] coast groups, in particular STORM. But I think for a while on the east coast SLAM! was considered sort of nationally as like a dominant New York group. So if you were organizing an activist around the world you -- I mean around the country you knew about SLAM!. And if you came to New York and you were doing some organizing you wanted to meet the people -- some people from SLAM! and hang out with them and talk about the work and all that kind of stuff. So --

Amaka: Can you speak generally to like this period's I guess significance in your own kind of political growth and politicization and -- yeah.

Kamau: Yeah, because I think for me -- which is sort of weird in the sense that even being light-skinned I didn't really know white folks, right? So through undergrad or whatever. So and even like people of color. Even that term or like, you know, Latino folks and other folks. Like you know what I mean? Like I was -- I just was used to being a lighter-skinned person in family, or room, or whatever. So (inaudible) SLAM! just introduced me to people from around the world and ideologies and stuff like that that people had. And so meeting smart people and getting to break down some things and some sort of my own preconceived notions about stuff. So for me I think yeah, those folks were like really helpful. Like I probably will pull Kai and Ashanti out, because I met them outside of a SLAM! context. But the folks -- no. The folks I got to know through SLAM! and Student Power Movement and that organizing sort of world again became friends and allies and people who I could have discussion, debate with. People who could, you know, give me information I didn't have before. So I think in that way and -- think I'm really appreciative of like those experiences that I had with them. Again I don't think I would have them otherwise. At least not in that way, you know. And these -- I mean these were folks (inaudible) just like committed people to politics and all the rest of it. And it gave me an opportunity to really get to know them.

Amaka: I guess is there anything else that you would like to kind of emphasize or say that you maybe haven't had the chance to say in regards to I guess SLAM! or this period generally?

Kamau: Only thing I might add is -- yeah. I mean I think it might have been -- yeah. I mean like reflecting on doing things differently and all that kind of stuff. I think there were some opportunities that like you could only see in hindsight that I think SLAM! and groups like STORM and some other groups probably had an opportunity to do something more national (inaudible) that maybe was a little bit of a loss in terms of what could have happened. Again, you know, that's really speculative and stuff like that. About what, you know, what could have happened and stuff like that. So I think that's one of the things that when people, you know, reflect about SLAM! work there's a lot of what could have happened. And I think that's always based on the fact that they did during that time period -- they became a central kind of organizing apparatus in New York City that really mattered. And so I think that that's really just in terms of their place in the organizing world. I think during that sort of like '90s, the late '90s and stuff like that. And early 2000s they played a significant role in politicizing a lot of folks in -- who came through sort of like a New York student era. And a lot of those folks are still involved in the work today. Organizing work today. A lot in [interesting?] capacities. But a lot of folks can sort of trace some of the work that they did or some of their ideological development as coming through SLAM!. And I think that's important.

Amaka: Can you speak to the, you know, the organizing work that you've done since this period? So you've, you know, you talked about, you know, kind of the early development of MXG a little bit. But can you just speak to generally like what -- after I guess law school? The, you know, movement work that you've done since.

Kamau: I think a lot of the work I've been involved in. One just, you know, as a lawyer. Being someone who could offer advice and be helpful in terms of development of organization, everything from folks wanting to have their non -- have nonprofit [01:00:00] status and stuff like that to [more?] board structure. So some of those background things. So I think I've been helpful or useful with that. I've done some criminal defense for

some organizers and activists. I think I was helpful for them. And so I think I've spent a lot of time post law school in terms of my work with MXGM (inaudible) organizing around police misconduct. So helping to start copwatches in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. So doing them and helping to structure them and laying out some of the legal frameworks. Do you know your rights workshops. I became heavily involved in some of the Black August work after a while in terms of promoting the issue of political prisoners and political exiles and using hip-hop. I've also been involved, I would say far more recently though, in between all of that in some electoral work and stuff. And trying to again move from just doing -- trying to move into building grassroots organizations or institutions. Knowing that these politics don't offer a lot of resources. But I think some of the electoral work particularly recently in Mississippi were some good leaps forward. At least in terms of showing that [I?] (inaudible) committed to that kind of work. And currently I'm doing organizing with -- in Atlanta with a group called Moral Mondays. It's basically trying to bring some stuff from North Carolina here to Atlanta. I mean here to Georgia in terms of fighting against some of the right-wing policies. Recently I guess about a year ago now I left MXGM and not necessarily because my ideology shifted. But just differences of opinion about I guess how resources should be used (inaudible) so I'm really at this stage in kind of organization (inaudible) as far as a home base organization. I'm still trying to do as much good political work as possible.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: Oh. And a -- I'm sorry. On a sidenote, I also do writing at times and stuff like that. So I blog. This thing called grassrootsthinking.org. And I wrote some -- an essay for a book and stuff like that. So I'm trying to do a little bit more writing and stuff.

Amaka: Okay, yeah, I've read your blog. I check in every now and then. Okay, well, that's pretty much all the questions I have. Yeah, I mean I don't know if there's anything else that you feel that you should add or any questions.

Kamau: No, I've talked long enough.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: But thank you for including me. If -- when you're done I guess (inaudible) basically you're submitting a paper for school?

Amaka: So I'm in a PhD program so this is part of my dissertation.

Kamau: Okay.

Amaka: So this is going to be part of a chapter that is talking about student resistance to, you know, the attack on both open admissions and affirmative action policies. The dissertation is more generally about the -- both the development of these sorts of policies and kind of how the right mobilized to attack and end the policies. And so I'm, you know, I have a chapter that focuses on student resistance to those policies. And mobilization. Because it's not -- I mean at this point it's -- there's nothing written on it really about talking about the ways in which students mobilized across the nation. I'm focusing on SLAM! and, you know, stuff that was happening in Berkeley but, you know, it's like I had to like, you know, fight some of my committee members. They were just like, "We've never heard of these organizations, they don't matter, like we don't -- we never heard of this." And I'm like, "What?" so that's part of me writing, you know, this for the dissertation. So yeah, I mean it's not, you know, this will not be done any time soon. But when I have a more polished chapter I'm definitely going to circulate it around and, you know, folks will probably see it like if it gets turned into a article folks will see it before it's published. So I'll definitely keep you in the loop.

Kamau: (inaudible) [friends?] also I believe. Yes, keep me in the loop. So if you publish or anything I'd love to read it.

Amaka: Okay, great.

Kamau: And good luck with it. It sounds like a really sort of intense and good thing so --

Amaka: Well, thank you. Thank you for participating and taking time out of your day. It's not easy to carve out, you know, an hour to talk to a random person. But I appreciate it.

Kamau: Don't worry about it. My boss doesn't know where I'm at right now so that's cool.

Amaka: Okay.

Kamau: I'm sure he'll (inaudible).

Amaka: All right. All right. Well, have a good rest of your day. [01:05:00]

Kamau: All right. You take care.

Amaka: All right. Peace. Bye. [01:05:04]

END OF AUDIO FILE