

10-29-2008

Senghor, Olivia

Senghor, Olivia Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Senghor, Olivia. October 29, 2008. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

Transcriber: Mary Maxwell
Date: October 29, 2008

Dr. Mark Naison: We are here at the home of our senior interviewer and translator for the Bronx African-American History Project, Karima Zerrou. We are interviewing Olivia Senghor. So Olivia could you start off by spelling your name?

Olivia Senghor (OS): It's Olivia, O-L-I-V-I-A, Senghor
S-E-N-G-H-O-R.

MN: And could you start off by telling us a little bit about your family? And how you grew up.

OS: I was born in Senegal, Dakar in 1978. And my mom is from Cape Verde Island and my dad is from Senegal. And I'm from a very political family because most of my dad's family has been in power, politically involved with the, with Senegal right after the independence of Senegal. After the French colonization was over. My grand uncle, what we call our grandfather, became the first President of Senegal.

MN: Is that the Sangora we all know and read?

OS: Yes. Leo Sangora who stayed in power for I think approximately 20 years and then he resigned because he always had a special love for writing and teaching. So he decided to become a writer after being a political figure.

MN: Now what ethnic group in Senegal is your family?

OS: We are Serer.

MN: Could you spell that?

OS: Serer is S-E-R-E-R.

MN: And what's the language group, other than French?

OS: We have few. We have Wolof. Wolof is the national one, then we have few different dialects. Just like Sudanese and the [inaudible], there's different ethnics.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

MN: Now what languages were spoken in your home when you were growing up?

OS: We were speaking French. The Sangora are very influenced by the French culture. In the province of Sangora we always say that it was a language of the master kind of. And to be able to be a strong black man you had to master the language of the master and stay close to your culture as well. So it was almost like getting used to weapon of the master to be able to enter, you know, the world of the master. Basically. You had to be better, always better than what they would expect.

MN: Now what religious tradition was your family?

OS: We are Christian.

MN: Was it a particular Christian church? Was it Catholic?

OS: We are Catholic, yes. We are Catholic. We do have a lot of Muslim as well now with a lot of marriage and kind of crossover, it's a pretty open family, if I can say it like that. But we're not really strict on the religion.

MN: Is Senegal a country with a large Islamic population as well?

OS: Yes, it is.

MN: Now did you go to a state run school or a private school when you were in--?

OS: When we were in Senegal, I was in the public school, my sisters went to private school and then we moved when I was 8 years old. We moved to France and we went to public school.

MN: And when your family, when you moved to France, who were the people that went to France?

OS: It was my mother, my two sisters, and my dad.

MN: And what section of Paris, was it Paris or--?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: Yes, it was in Paris. We were living in the 13 Avon des Moi. Which is the 13th district of Paris. And then we moved to the 11th District, called Nation.

MN: Now Karima you're welcome at any point to enter into this with questions.

KZ: Okay, I will.

MN: Now, not knowing Paris. Were these neighborhoods with a lot of African immigrants or were they neighborhoods with few?

OS: No, actually the 13th Avon des Moi was more I would say white, and Asian. It's more like Chinese. And the 11th Avon des Moi, I would say there's a little bit of intermix. But we were living on the Boulevard Parter, which has a lot of actually Jewish.

MN: Now what level of education did your parents have?

OS: My dad had a PhD in Law and my mother went, I think she just had a Masters in Business Administration. So she was a secretary for the United Nations.

MN: And was your father's degree from Senegal or from France?

OS: From both.

MN: From both?

OS: Yes, he studied in Senegal and he studied in France as well.

MN: And was the expectation that you and your sisters would become professional people?

OS: Very high.

MN: Now did you ever imagine that you would be coming to the United States? Was this something that was inside you at any point?

OS: I think it was. Because I always felt like I was a little different from the family in general. Because they're all very book smart, very intellectual. They're really very conservative in the way of we had to live our life and study and go to university and get a degree, and I've always

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

been an artist since I was young. So my mother used to always say, I feel like she's not gonna follow the path that, you know, the others have to follow. So it was almost like, but they would always wonder, but if she's an artist, where could she actually succeed the most, because you know, Europe is a little bit more conservative, it's a little bit more, you know.

MN: Now, how did your artistic talent express itself?

OS: I used to draw, I used to draw and I was, my art teacher would always say, you know she's got very good capabilities at her age, to draw things, so she used to put me in contests. And I won like maybe two or three contests.

MN: This was in France?

OS: It was in France. Yes, it started being a little bit more defined after, after my primary school. That's when I used to know--.

MN: Now what about your musical taste? What sort of music were you exposed to in Senegal?

OS: It was very eclectic. Very different. It was a lot of reggae, a lot of Portuguese music and West Indian Afro beats, because of the influence of my mother. Soul, jazz, my mom loved music. Blues.

MN: Did anybody in your family play music instruments?

OS: We do have an uncle who is who's a dancer and play piano, but the majority is more studying books.

KZ: And the mixed marriage wasn't a problem?

OS: And the mixed marriage wasn't a problem, no.

MN: Now is your mother light skinned?

OS: She looks like she could be a very light Dominican. That's how she looks.

MN: And where did your parents meet?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: They met in Senegal, because most of the Cape Verdean community usually leaves Cape Verde Island to come and migrate to Senegal to look for jobs or to be--.

MN: Is the Cape Verdean population, do they have an ethnic niche that they gravitate towards certain occupations in Senegal? Or--?

OS: They're usually very good at sewing. A lot of Cape Verdeans are tailors, sew, cook.

MN: Because in the United States there was a significant Cape Verdean population in like New Bedford, Massachusetts and even some in the Bronx. A lot of involved in fishing initially.

OS: Well, as well because they're an island. They do fishing.

MN: Now when you were in Paris. Were you exposed to hip-hop culture?

OS: Yes. I felt like being already drawn to artistry, drawing and everything, I was always surrounded by music. My sisters loved my music, my other sister, my mom. So right away was always a very important influence to listen to the street, the radio, the American hip-hop and I think that's when I really knew, somewhere daydreaming, that I was attracted to the United States.

KZ: Didn't you create a group?

OS: Yes. So what happened is that on the side of studying and being at school, I entered a group, it was a few friends of mine. We were, it's not college, it's secondary school, you say high school. We entered a group and every night after school we would go and sing and write songs and we got a contract out of it. We met a producer and we got signed with a major label. BMG, Arista, and I remember we had TLC, Whitney Houston, was part of the label.

MN: What was the name of the group?

OS: It was called Baby Norton.

MN: Do you have any CDs from the time?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: I don't think so. I do have pictures.

MN: Do you have any of the songs preserved anywhere?

OS: I don't think so.

MN: Now was this like and R&B group or--?

OS: It was a quartet. It was four girls, at the time I remember we came out, we did one video and two singles. They wanted to try. They put two singles out there, but we didn't sell as much as they wanted us to sell. As a girl group, I think we sold 100,000 copies. And for them it was not enough because right after that Destiny's Child came out and Spice Girls came out.

MN: Now what, you sang in English?

OS: We sang in French and English.

MN: You sang in French and English?

OS: Yes.

MN: Can you give a sample singing something? For the tape? Just to give us an idea of what it sounded like. Of one of your songs.

OS: [Sings in French]

MN: That's terrific. You're good. You still do this?

OS: No, I don't sing anymore. But I would like to sing, I just think that it's costs a lot of money to get a teacher. But it's a great way for me to release tension.

MN: Now what did you look like? How did you present? Did you dress like hip-hop star or--?

OS: Yes, we were influenced by the streets. So it was very influenced by Mary J. Blige. So it was very, yes it was a little R&B like TLC. It was--.

MN: So you dressed in baggy clothes?

OS: Yes, we had baggy jeans.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

MN: I have to see pictures so you'll--.

OS: I have pictures on the Myspace.

MN: Right, sure we'll see that. So what did your parents think of this.

OS: They think I was crazy. But they were, I would say they were curious and intrigued about--.
They were just observing me. It's almost like they put their self on the side watching their young daughter show them--.

MN: Were you the youngest?

OS: I'm the youngest. I don't think they would have been so lenient on the two eldest.

MN: And were they going on to school and professional careers? Your older sisters.

OS: Yes.

MN: What do they do now?

OS: One is a lawyer, she's yes, she's in law. And the other one studied law but she dropped out, she was like it's not my path, I'm sorry. She said to my dad I can't do it just to please you, so now she has a PR company in Africa.

MN: In Senegal?

OS: Both of them moved back.

MN: They moved back.

OS: One is in Ivory Coast, the other one, the lawyer is in Senegal.

MN: Now what was the sort of hip-hop scene in Paris like when you started? How old were you when you started going to parties?

OS: 17, 16. 16 we were going to afternoon parties, I remember it was a--.

MN: The two of you knew each other?

OS: Yes.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

MN: Where'd you meet?

OS: We met in the party.

KZ: Some hip-hop parties in Paris.

OS: One of the girl that was singing with me, used to know Karima very well.

KZ: We used to practice basketball, with the girl.

OS: We used to play basketball together.

MN: Now did you ever become a graf artist? Did you ever use your--?

OS: Never.

MN: You never--. Were any of the people in your people in your circle doing graffiti?

OS: Friends, yes were doing graffiti. I mean they were so influenced at the time, we were like 16, the big rap group in France MTN and MTN was all about like the dark, the hats, the baggy jeans, the graffiti, the break dance. So they had a big influence.

MN: And so all, the whole four elements of hip-hop were part of your lifestyle, the emceeing the deejaying, the break dancing?

OS: Yes.

MN: Did you ever break dance?

OS: I never break danced but I used to date, I had a little boyfriend he was from [inaudible], from California, born and raised in California and he was a break dancer he used to be part of a group called Jam and the Groove and they were touring all around the world to kind dance and do shows. And one of his friends was part of Jam and the Groove, was part of a big group here. Called Rock Steady Crew.

MN: Really? Well Rock Steady Crew is from, originally from the Bronx.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: They were all together. I think they called all the break-dancers from every places of the United States and put them together to make that show.

MN: Now were you aware of the Bronx when you were getting involved in hip-hop? It was more like the United States or did the Bronx stand out?

OS: It was about New York City and we would hear KRS-One saying the Bronx.

MN: South, South Bronx, South Bronx, right.

OS: So we knew that it was there. And it was those big earrings and the Reebok shoes.

MN: Did you guys wear big earrings there?

KZ: Yes, we remember having big hoops.

OS: And the hairstyle and--.

MN: Now were there particular places where people would gravitate to like the hip-hop kids in Paris?

OS: Yes, there's an area called L'alle la de France. Where else?

KZ: There's a lot.

OS: Champs-Élysées. Where they would come. They would even have the big--.

MN: You had the boom boxes too? That was--. So it was very much like growing up here in terms of--.

OS: Definitely. I think the youth in France has been completely influenced and even they got more open-minded and I think it brought cultures together and the youth together.

MN: Was the hip-hop culture crossed cultural lines, racial lines in Paris?

OS: Yes. I think even when they were from--. Because my sister were in the very upscale and very bourgeois school and I refused to go to that school because I remember them complaining like, they're not so nice. You know, everybody's so stuck up, they didn't have many good, good

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

friends from school because it was very, you know it was the sons of this and the family of this. So the two went there and I personally say to my father, I don't want to go in a school like this, I'm going to be unhappy. I want to be with regular you know, kids and who're from a middle class family. You know who're not stuck up, who're are not like this, and I remember that even in my sisters school, they would listen to some hip-hop and it--.

MN: Would open them up a little bit.

OS: Open them up a little bit.

MN: Did your father or mother ever complain about boys you were with? That they were too thuggish or--?

OS: I mean I never really show them. The friends I had. Not to my dad anyway, my mom she knew, some, but it was really my sister. She would always say they're not for you. You are way too, you know, you are way too, you're better than them. You're more open-minded you can do so much better.

MN: Now having this musical success at an early age, how did it shape your idea of what you wanted to do with your life? Did you feel, I want to be in this entertainment industry, this is my world? Or did it disillusion you?

OS: No, I would say it started, it's almost like, it put a right away a pressure on my shoulders, because it's almost like I said to my parents. It's a glimpse of success, because we did, we managed to do something and we were young, please let me do what I want to do. And my parents was like but you know if you don't sell any CDs you're gonna have a contract basically ended. And that's what happened. We didn't sell enough so we lost our contract and then from that they were like what're you gonna do if you don't have a contract? If music is your thing. So it's either you're gonna pursue into music or you've gotta find something else. And I guess

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

because I was young, I was still not completely aware of what I wanted to do. I knew singing was a passion, but I was wondering is that really what I want to do, do I want to be by myself, on stage fighting everyday trying to see. Because it's a pretty cutthroat industry, so I just asked them, listen I just wanted to be on my own, travel, and find myself. And that's when I left home.

MN: And had you graduated from high school at that point?

OS: Yes.

MN: Okay so you graduated from high school, but didn't go to college?

OS: Didn't go to college, didn't go to law school.

MN: Now, but your sisters both went to law school?

OS: Yes.

MN: So your parents said, fine travel the world and find yourself?

OS: Well, yes. They say travel the world, find yourself, but specially go to school. However you would be. So my mother was happy because she will perfect her English. So that's nothing lost. She will be [inaudible]. But my father [inaudible], what is she going to do?

OS: And I was like there's something I like to do. I like to draw and I like to paint. Maybe I wouldn't mind being a makeup artist. Instead of painting it's a good way of making a career and getting paid out of the things that I like to do.

KZ: And being in the entertainment--.

OS: And being in the entertainment.

MN: When did you first, did you meet makeup artists when you were in--?

OS: Yes, when we were singing we had a makeup artist. We used to hate the way that he would do makeup on us. And the girls would always say, can you just touch up, I just had a naturally pretty good touch. So they used to always touch up, and be like can you touch up my eyebrows,

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

he was a little too heavy on this one. So I used to touch up before stage, or parties or wherever he was, and then it was like that's something I like. And that's a good compromise, it's not on the scene, it's behind the scene, but it's still in the entertainment so that's how I started. I said to my parents, I'm leaving, I'm going to England, and there I'm going to pay for my own school, because I knew they were disappointed. My dad was disappointed. He was worried. So I was like I cannot ask them anything. I have to make it on my own.

MN: So you went to England next?

OS: So I went to England.

MN: And why England?

OS: Because I was scared to come to United States.

[Laughter]

MN: Did the two of you talk about all this stuff?

KZ: No, but I knew she was in London.

MN: So you went, now is it easier to come, to go to England from France?

OS: I won't it's easier, I would say because it's close to home, it gives you that safe feeling that maybe it's gonna be alright. If there's any issues, you can just take a train or the plane and you're there. It's an hour away.

MN: Right.

OS: United States feels like the belly of the beast. Because most of the movies you would see, you would hear about the guns. It was you know you get scared.

MN: Menace to Society, Boyz in the Hood.

OS: New Jack City.

MN: New Jack City, Juice. Did you see King of New York?

OS: No.

MN: That's another one.

OS: So all those movies I think would make you a little freaked out.

MN: London they don't have guns, right.

OS: Yes. So it was the fear of the guns and not knowing anybody. I was like okay, let me just first perfect my English and then get used to another language, in a slower pace.

MN: Now how old were you when you did this?

OS: I was, I moved to England, I was 20 years old.

MN: Right, wow. Did you go specifically to go to school to become a makeup artist?

OS: Yes.

MN: And you knew that there were schools?

OS: I knew that there were schools, I knew that there were schools. I had a friend there who was able to make some research for me. And she was like you know you can work, have a little job on the side and then, and then you know--.

MN: Did you have somebody to move in with?

OS: Yes.

MN: So you knew somebody there, who could put you up until you got on your feet?

OS: Yes. So I lived with her. We were living in a little studio for a couple of months. Maybe like 7 months. I was working in a little store, selling clothes. And on the side, I tried to find a job, another job. And it's funny because it's when my sister came out on vacation, and she was like what're you going to do? And I'm like I'm more capable of saving money with this little job on the side because London is very expensive, so she was like you need another job. And she was like me too, I don't know if I want to keep on doing, you know studying laws, I'm at a junction

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

of my life, I don't know what I want to do. So I was like what if you want to come to London, we can move together. And she was like I don't know I have to see, but you gotta find a job and she was here for a couple of months and she was like I'm having some vacation, I'd like to, you know, work and make money on the side. So we went together, looking for job, hunting for job and I got the job myself. I went and passed by M.A.C., M.A.C. Cosmetics, and I was like that the only company like that I felt like I could work for, and I felt like I would learn a lot about my craft, would be M.A.C. Cosmetics. And it was Christmas time and she said why don't you try, just go talk to the manager and say listen, I'm very good at what I do, I'm a makeup artist. Don't say that you're learning how to, just say that you're a makeup artist and you will get the job. And I got the job. So I went to school and at the same time, I was perfecting. But I never told them that I was a beginner, I just learned while I was there, practicing and then I went my little makeup course.

MN: Now were the two of you emailing or communicating during this time while you were in England?

OS: No, we lost contact.

KZ: Yes, we lost contact.

OS: Because she had went to New York.

KZ: Yes, I was in New York. I was the craziest one, I just left. But she was in London.

MN: But you left when you had the whole career in France, promoting and everything?

KZ: Yes.

OS: I remember we used to see each other a lot when we were singing. So it was after that we stopped singing, I think that's when you left as well.

KZ: Yes. I left in '99. And you moved in--?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: 2000.

KZ: Yes, so we left pretty much the same time. I knew she was in London, but I was in New York, and you know the first year when you're moving somewhere, you're killing yourself. And then I found out that she was in Miami, so then--.

MN: Okay, so you're in London and then--?

OS: So in London I kind of, I fell in love with the art of makeup and I just realized, I don't want to be stuck with, I mean at M.A.C., and go with the company because that's not really, I'd like to freelance. So what I did, I worked as part time with them, for a couple years, and then on the side every week I was trying to get dates, outside music gigs, singers, models putting my name out there just to get pictures and my portfolio to be able to work with other people. And I would always say in my head, this is the time that I have to learn how to master my craft. Because as soon as I arrive in the United States, I'm gonna make a go for the record company. And the real professionals, and I even thought at a point films as well, but I was more into fashion I guess. But I was like this is the time that I have to really perfect my craft.

MN: Okay, so you're developing this, you're starting to work with a lot of performance people, and what it is a word of mouth thing?

OS: Yes.

MN: You do a good job and somebody--?

OS: Going out and networking, yes.

MN: Okay, so when did you decide to come to the United States and how did you get here?

OS: Okay, we went on vacation several times. Because my sister, suddenly after her masters, came to London and she said I'm gonna do an LLM which I don't know the--.

MN: That's a law degree.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: She decided to do it in London. So she came and she moved with me and a couple of friends who had decided to come because I was there, I was a little bit more stable, so they came. So while they were here, in London, we decided to go every year on vacation to America. So it was a way for me to get acquainted with that.

MN: Now, did you reconnect during--? No?

OS: I was going to Miami, I wasn't going to New York.

MN: You were going on vacation to Miami?

OS: Yes.

MN: Why?

OS: Because we wanted to leave, London is so gloomy, and you always think vacation, sun. Beaches.

MN: Do a lot of Europeans go to Miami?

OS: A lot.

MN: So that's a very common thing?

OS: Yes. So I went there and a few times I came to New York as well for short, short time. But I lost contact with Karima.

KZ: We bumped into each other one time in Brooklyn, at a restaurant.

OS: Yes.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Which restaurant was that? Was it that South African restaurant?

KZ: I remember saying, you said that you might move here but you didn't know yet.

MN: So when did you decide, I'm gonna go visit.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: 2003. [inaudible] It was good. I'm in France I started keeping in contact with France, I was like soon it's gonna happen. And I have to make the move. And then in 2003, so three years after that I moved to London, a friend of mine she was English, she was British. Her name is Jo Baker, told me [inaudible] in London I don't think we can really break in the career that we have, I think we have to move to the United States. Because it's wild, it's bigger, and you have more chances to get it. So I was like so when do you want to move? She said yes, let's move the 10th of March, 2003. It just started with a conversation, and we moved. We resigned and we moved.

MN: Right and you didn't have a work visa or--?

OS: No, we moved as a vacation, 3 months in the territory.

MN: Vacation right, tourist.

OS: Tourist, vacation.

MN: And you moved to where?

OS: To Miami, South Beach.

MN: Right. And how long did you stay in Miami?

OS: I stayed in Miami, 3 years.

MN: And were you working in the industry? Did you break in, and get to work?

OS: Yes. That's what happened. I moved with my friend and she had, she had a bad luck because her makeup kit got stolen the same day we moved, so she lost like, maybe like \$10,000 dollars worth of makeup, so she had to fly back to London to rebuild her makeup. But I told her I cannot fly, we gave up everything in London, I cannot go back. So I got to stay, so I stayed by myself. And I met other French people there, who were very, very welcoming and one of them his name is Nicholas, he said listen, you don't have to stay in a hotel, because it was very expensive to stay in a hotel, so he was like move into my house. And when everything's fine and

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

you get on your feet, you go. And I stayed with him and almost 6 months, and that's when I start working, in the beginning. Where I was working I was doing makeup so it was very easy for me to get cash in hands.

MN: And this is mainly with performance artists?

OS: Yes. It was a good newcomer artist from Miami called Jacki-O, she's from your Dirty South. A rapper from the Dirty South, very, very bad, very, very ghetto.

MN: Jacki-O?

OS: Jacki-O.

MN: Does she have CDs?

OS: Yes.

MN: And so your work is on the cover?

OS: Yes. I have a lot of pictures, whatever you need Karima can get it. I have a lot of pictures of her. But yes, I got involved in the environment of the rap, I would say the girl rap industry.

MN: In Miami?

OS: In Miami.

MN: Now what were those people like to work with? Were they very different from--?

OS: Very different.

MN: So they had their stage image and then their real personality?

OS: I felt like the stage and the real is almost the same, because they're portraying this new, this different from the hip-hop of the South Bronx, where it was about emcee and the lord of hip-hop and lyrics and this and that. They were talking about money, guns, sex, and rock and roll. It's not rock and roll but it's hip-hop roll. So it's a different, way different mentality. It was a very dirty mentality, they were very dirty, crafty, greedy environment.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

MN: Could you feel like, that the people were difficult to work with?

OS: Very. I had to adjust myself a lot to everything. I used to, I remember because at that time I was married. I had a boyfriend who married me, and we were living together. And he was somewhere that, you know, he was helping me to stay solid and focused because yes, Miami is a city where a lot of things are going on. Especially South Beach, and I used to always go with them on tour around, because she was touring, and yes it has been very difficult because they couldn't understand me. They never leaved Miami, even then coming to New York was very difficult. They would always see me talking to any type of people, Cuban, white, whatever and it would always be so scary for them. I remember--.

MN: They were very insular, they only talked to other black people?

OS: Yes, very. And they couldn't understand, they couldn't even understand me. They couldn't understand that I had a black skin, but my country was completely different. I would listen to different types of music and speak another language. It was very weird and they kind of a little paranoid because they so insulated that they almost like, almost like who are you? [inaudible] Right away they see that you, it's almost like you're suspect. They're not opening and welcoming, like hey, hi, who are you? Like we would open our arms to somebody, a stranger, it's more like who that person is, and what they're going to do, you're an intruder.

MN: Now did you ever feel physically in danger, with them?

OS: I was physically in danger.

MN: Did you have guns pulled on you?

OS: No, but I had death threats. I had death threats, I had a restraining order, and I think that's when I realized, like Oh my God, I'm in the United States. I'm by myself. Because I couldn't talk about it to my parents, so it was very tough for me to readjust, because I was like I'm now in

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

an Afro-American environment. I am black myself, but I [inaudible] to them now. And it was very difficult, I think I even lost myself a little bit at that point. I got depressed, I was very depressed, because it's almost like, I was working so I was a slave some way, I was attached to the money that I was making, because it was a way for me to survive and I was the breadwinner of my couple. I was making much more money than my husband was making because it was great. I mean I was being paid, going on tour, I had the [inaudible], I had everything. I had the show, it was the lifestyle of the show. But thing is behind the scene when the lights comes down, it was horrible. They don't respect each other, they curse at each other all the time. I'll kill you. They fight, they wanna fight, everything is a fight. You cannot be nice you gotta always be always almost always like this. Because they will try to use you if you're nice, so you cannot even smile that much. I remember the artist telling me at the time, Olivia you're not equipped to be in the United States, you're not equipped, you people in Europe are too kind. I see you smile with people, I see you giving kisses to people, we don't give kisses. Here you gotta have it tough, you know, the laws of the street and I was like wow. And then it came a point where it was so much and I felt like I was losing myself into it, I was like I gotta quit. And when I told her that I was quitting, because we were having arguments, she would always try to abuse my kindness. She would always try to call me at 5 o'clock in the morning, can you come to my house do my makeup at 4 o'clock in the morning? I gotta come tomorrow to your house and do--. They had no respect of schedule, they had no respect of what organization, I never worked in those conditions, and the fact that I was an illegal immigrant had to make me kind of submit and accept those type of rules because I knew that I didn't have any papers to do it. So it came a point where we were on a show, the BET Awards in Los Angeles and I told her that I was quitting and when I told her that I was quitting, I called the record company and I was telling

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

them I'm tired, my checks are late, I'm quitting, I want all my checks and I'm done, I'm done with everything. And she said, you'll never leave me, if you leave me bitch I need you, so if you leave me it's gonna be a problem and then I went out and I was like laughing about it, I was like you crazy. And I left and when I came back they broke into my hotel room and they stole everything from my room and I had to fly back in my pajamas in Miami.

MN: They stole all your clothes?

OS: They stole everything and they stole my kit. They could of stole everything but not my kit. My kit took so many years to build it, from London. So they took everything and the LAPD was like there's no proof of infraction, so it's an inside job. So the hotel cannot pay me back, so I lost, it was basically a loss. And I was wondering how long it would take me to rebuild everything because it was almost like \$10,000 worth as well, and it reminded me of my friend who had to leave me to go back to London. To rebuild her kit. So I went back and I worked and I had a friend of mine who was good enough feel for my story and he send me \$7,000 from New York, he's African as well. He was African, I think he went back to Guinea, who went through the same story. You know, illegal immigrant and he felt for my story and he's like you're a hard worker let me send you money. I rebuild your kit and make sure you work with decent people later, and don't be a slave of the income that you making, because you were driven by the money. You're living for your job but you just want to make the money, so that's what happened. And I said I'm gonna sue the record company because it's not, I can't tolerate the fact that I've been hurt like this and there's nothing that we can do. And when I say I'm gonna sue the record company, that's when I started having threats. They were calling my husband saying she's French, who does she think she is? It's not her country.

MN: What record label was this?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: TVT Records.

MN: Is it a local label?

KZ: It's a big label, but--.

OS: They used to have a rapper called Lil' Jon and the Ying-Yang Twins. So anyway, it's when I had this that I started having death threats and they would say she can't go in any hip-hop parties. We are gonna recognize her she doesn't know who we are. But we are basically a gang, anything can happen to her. And that's when I went to ask for a restraining order, because every time I would see her she would try to fight.

MN: Where were you then, living?

OS: In Miami.

MN: You were back in Miami.

OS: Miami, Miami. But when they stole my room and everything, she punched me because I said I know you, you guys stole my things so, she punched me. So it became even physical, [inaudible]. But nobody knows about it besides my sisters. But I went back and I went to see the judge and really realized that it was time for me to leave Miami is when the judge told me, after the restraining order, she said, I'm not from here myself neither, and I have a young daughter who's at school and every day comes back from school after the fight. Because she fights every day, they try to fight her because she's pretty. Because she's not from here, because she's different. And I told my daughter, she would always come back and cry, and I've had to slap her real hard and say every time people gonna start fighting with you, if you're not fighting back, you're gonna have a slap from me. And she said outside of the court, go get your self a gun. That's what the judge told me. And when the judge told me this, I was like oh no. If the judge is even telling me on the side go get yourself a gun to protect yourself because she started telling

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

me about a friend of hers who got shot in Texas, I was like oh no. You know what, I think it's time for me to leave. And I told my husband, you know what, we've been together for a while and everything has been pretty tough between you and I. Because he had his allegiance, I said I have to leave, I cannot be in Miami anymore. I need to focus on myself, I need to go to a more diverse area where people with different background. A little bit more, you know, open mind. And I think it's New York. I have to go to New York.

MN: And so how did you end up coming to New York? Who did you know here?

OS: I didn't know anybody really. Because I wasn't talking to Karima. No, I'm lying, I knew a friend of mine called Brigit, she's actually somebody that hired me for makeup services when I was working with this rapper from Miami. And we became friends because she was French. She was working for Marc Ecko Enterprises and they hired me for this. And this is when I moved. I moved a little bit in her apartment for a little bit of time.

MN: Where was she living?

OS: She was living, at that time she was living in Brooklyn. So I moved in a little bit of time in her apartment. And then I stayed there for a little bit, start looking for job. Went back to Miami, tried to pack all my stuff, because I was still doing transit, and I called my mother and I said, you know, is there any parents of us that we have that could welcome me for a while and she was like yes, we have a cousin in the Bronx. And I said well, I'll go to the Bronx.

MN: You have a cousin in the Bronx?

OS: Yes.

MN: From Senegal?

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: Yes. I mean, you know how our families can be big, I didn't know really that, about that cousin either. So that's when I decided to move to the Bronx and I lived with this cousin of mine for a good, at least a good 8 months.

MN: Okay and where was she living?

OS: She was in Grand Concourse.

MN: And what street?

OS: She was in 138th, about 138th.

MN: A little south of Hostos College?

OS: Yes.

MN: And what was your impression of the Bronx, when you moved here?

OS: Very big. Very big, a lot of Spanish. Very Spanish, Spanish oriented community compared to Brooklyn where I was living with Brigit. And yes, I felt like, because the Spanish sometimes remind me of my mother's side. The Cape Verdean can feel a little Portuguese.

MN: Did you feel like comfortable in the Bronx when you got here?

OS: Yes. I felt comfortable. It was still unknown, I was still trying to readjust, but I felt comfortable. I wasn't afraid or anything. I guess I was going through so much trauma at that time anything would have been good.

KZ: Better than what you had--?

OS: Yes.

MN: And where did the two of you meet, run into each other?

OS: Was it here in the street? It was.

KZ: I think I came, I saw her at the store, yes.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: Because I went back to M.A.C. That I left in London, I went back to work for them in New York City, because I was like okay that's going to be my stability, three days a week I'm going to work for them, and do the same thing that I did in London.

MN: Now right did they have a booth in Bloomindales?

OS: Yes. It's one of the biggest makeup counter at Bloomindales on the, on the ground floor.

And one day--.

KZ: Yes, because I worked at the UN and I'm passing sometimes I go to Bloomingdales, sometimes if I don't wanna take the train right away and that's how I saw you at the store.

MN: Wow.

OS: That's how, yes, and I was like wow. I can't believe it. And then we realized that we were living next to each other. So that's how it started.

MN: And have you been working together? In professionally at all?

OS: Yes. Karima is always whenever she can, you know, because she's still in the entertainment industry, so whenever she has, makeup or she feels like she can fix me any interviews or something, she, she does it. So and sometimes I even do her makeup whenever she needs to go somewhere.

KZ: Yes.

OS: And she comes and I have her makeup done. And she knows that I would like to have a beauty salon because I have a lot of customers of mine. And I would love to build a beauty salon in America. Because I feel like most of my customers--.

MN: Oh, wow that's your work?

OS: Yes.

MN: I'll tell you a funny story about me and makeup after the interview--.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: So yes, she would fit me. And then by observing her as well, because she's a very dynamic person. She does a lot of things. I was observing, because it was a trial.

MN: What you're going through is unbelievable.

OS: Yes. I feel like and it is sometimes even hard to share it with people because they don't understand what we go--.

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

OS: --Of what we go through and how much we are willing to go that far. And what sacrifice we have to make and the determination that comes from nowhere. And most of the time it's already hard to leave a place, a comfort zone and to be. And to get abused and abused by system of maneuvers, it's so hard and people don't know about it. Because there's no voice for the voiceless. You are an underdog and you stay an underdog until you shine. And sometimes when you shine they don't really tell you the stories of most of the people that have success. Success here. So it came a point where I was in a concert that she organized with some French people, some French artists. And I looked at all the French community, the French speaking community and I saw this diversity and I was like, you know what, I would like to make something that would be a platform for the voiceless to be able to hear my voice. So that's when I started writing this documentary based on my stories, but also on her stories. On many peoples stories. And I was like, I'd like to make it a reality TV show, where we would put. Instead of putting people that just are there for entertainment. I would love to combine the entertainment and also food for thoughts.

MN: You should definitely do Choseanne. He has an amazing immigrant story of coming here and then being hit by a car and being in the hospital for 3 months and then getting back on his feet. And his first album was called something side, of the Brighter Side of Misery.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: I would love to because the thing is, this is what happened. We started working together, each characters of the documentary have their life and we feature them on some of the episodes.

KZ: Before you talk about the documentary, there's an important part you missed in the story that I remember. When you talked about sacrifice, you need to talk about your sacrifice, family. That you didn't go home.

OS: Yes. So yes, yes exactly the reason why this documentary and I'm really trying to push and I don't know how far we're gonna go because I believe in it, I put my own funds into it the reason why it happened is because also when I was in Miami before moving to New York, my father passed away. And I wasn't able to--. I wasn't able to go back. [Crying] I wasn't able to go back. And because I always felt like I was a child that always did whatever she needed to do and go follow your dream, [inaudible]. It was, it was, it was really tough because you're second-guessing again, is it worth it? Is it worth it to go through all this and him not having been able to see me succeed in things that I wanted to succeed in. So I wasn't able to assist his funeral. And then I felt like the black sheep because I was again the one far. When my sister was there and everybody was there, but I thought maybe this is the memory I have to keep up in life and yes, it's almost like it's a pressure because I'm always in the back of my head, I'm always thinking, I gotta do something because we go through so much sacrifices, that we have to do something, somewhere, somehow. And keep our integrity. Because it can get lost and you can get you know, down, so down in this, in this, in this land, which is, you know a welcoming land but at the same time, it's really tough to, to go through all those sacrifices and I feel sorry for people that don't have other friends to talk about it with. And I was lucky enough to leave Miami, because in Miami they couldn't understand, I know there's a Caribbean community and they are very close to each other. And there's a Haitian community but it wasn't the same. Because we're not from

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

the same community either. They couldn't understand, I had a Haitian friend who wasn't able to understand, and she would listen to me. But yes, it was tough, even my husband felt really hopeless. He didn't know what to do, what to say. And I'd second guess myself because first I lost somebody that I really loved, that couldn't wait for me. Because he was like, you know, come back and I was like I can't. I can't come back, you're telling me to come back I don't know if we're gonna marry each other, I don't know, there's too many things that I've done so far, for me to come back like this, with no real guarantee. So I lost, you know, somebody I really appreciate, but I think it wasn't meant to be, and then I lost my father. So after losing my father yes, I think that's when I really decided, okay you have to move to New York. And that's why my mom said, you know, you have family. I always loved New York in a way, she goes to Miami for the weather and everything. But she was like New York is the place where you can really see opportunities and be surrounded by people that have the same drive and make sure you're just strong, because it's a very tough city as well. And yes. So by coming here, yes, I would say just sitting down and analyzing people, I think that's when the idea of the documentary came, at this concert. I just felt like, you know, I don't know, no matter what it takes it would be a good to be a window on the United States and follow this youth. This young youth, that is--.

KZ: African.

OS: A lot of African and I don't mind making other immigrants participating because they have other stories, but it starts with us. And we are from Africa.

KZ: There's a cast of what? Of six of us?

OS: Six of us.

MN: Well, Choseanne would be so perfect.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: The funny thing is we've been using songs from all around the world and we'd love Karima to show you all the episodes, she can.

KZ: I'll send you all the links.

OS: We chosen a song and I just had two days ago, the confirmation of the producer who was helping for the show, who told me that it has been taken at the festival of the Afro-American Women Film Festival, and they want to screen it at the United Nations, and I would love you to come and see it.

MN: Oh, please, I mean I'm. Now we're, you know. Now have you been in touch with Bronx Museum of the Arts about this?

OS: No.

MN: Okay, because there's an amazing man there who's the program director who got me involved. Named Sergio Bessa, he's from Brazil. He would love this. We should definitely bring it to his attention. Because this is an amazing place, it's right across the street. And they're very international. And this is right up their alley. And I will give you his contact information, both of you, and also Choseanne's and but we'll stay in touch because--.

KZ: I would love to use Choseanne's songs, we're looking for--.

MN: This new album is, it's so powerful.

OS: The thing is we have a deadline. They want to screen it on the 14th of November, which is next week.

MN: Do you have any time to come to my office? I can give you his album.

KZ: Maybe you and I are meeting anyways on Sunday for another interview?

MN: Now Sunday I don't have my car is the problem. See, I mean I can come up here by subway, it's no problem.

Interviewee: Olivia Senghor
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Karima Zerrou

OS: Are you driving now?

MN: Yes.

OS: I could have come. We could have gone and pick it up. The sooner the better because--.

MN: Do you wanna drive to my office and then I'll drive you, I'll give you the CD.

KZ: But then, don't you have a class?

MN: Yes, at 5, but then you'd have to, it'd be kind of tight. Is there any chance--?

KZ: You can drop it anytime at my building.

MN: Okay, I could do that, I have to pass by here tomorrow on the way to a lecture in Manhattan, so I'll drop the Choseanne CD. But in the meantime because I have to go and you probably both have to go, is there anything, first of all thank you for sharing this--.

[END OF INTERVIEW]