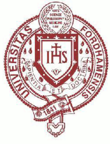

Fordham University

Fordham Research Commons

Oral Histories

Bronx African American History Project

Fall 11-18-2024

Kazembe Balagun Interview: Part 1

Mark Naison

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist

Part of the African American Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Naison, Mark, "Kazembe Balagun Interview: Part 1" (2024). *Oral Histories*. 371.
https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist/371

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu,iiqbal1@fordham.edu.

Kazembe Balagun Interview Transcript

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Stephanie Robinson-Ramirez, Dr. Shellae Versey, Dr. Steven Payne

Interviewee: Kazembe Balagun

– –

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Today I am honored to have Kazembe Balagun, who is a tremendous figure in New York City intellectual history, now the executive director of the Maysles Cinema, for many years, outreach coordinator of the Brecht Forum, and somebody who has tremendous respect in the progressive community in New York City. We are doing this interview as the first interview in a new oral history project concentrating on Co-op City's emergence as a center of Black culture and political life in New York City. With us today are the graduate assistant of the Bronx African American History Project, Stephanie Robinson-Ramirez, Professor Shallae Versey, a psychology professor at Fordham who has been doing some pioneering Bronx research, and Dr. Steven Payne, who is the executive director of the Bronx County Historical Society. So Kazembe, to start off as we do all of our interviews, tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up moving to Co-op City.

Kazembe Balagun (KB): Okay yeah yeah, thank you for having me. I was born on May 26, 1976. My birth name is Keith Alexander Mitchell. The name that I took on for myself from influence is Kazembe Balagun, which means – Kazembe is Shona, for wise and gifted leader, and Balagun is Yoruba for warrior. I am the youngest of three children, and my parents came up to New York City during the great migration in 1961. In fact, it was my mother who came up first, and my dad – who was at Bethune Cookman – came back to Charleston to be with my mom and went to my grandmother's house, and my grandmother was like, "No, she left. She's already in New York City." You know what I'm saying? And then my dad went to follow to New York City. Long story short, my dad soon follows, my mother was a domestic and also works at Rockefeller University as a maid, and my dad worked at the Garment District. Their first apartment was actually in the Bronx, Sherman Mackenzie Avenue – McKinley Avenue. And then they had my sister, Wanda, and then they got married in 1965. Then after 1965, 1969, they had my brother. And I think it was at that time, my mom, who had probably taken my sister out

on some walks across Joyce Kilmer Park, saw across the Macombs Dam Bridge that they were building a development called the Polo Grounds. And so my mom went across to Harlem to put in an application for the Polo Grounds. They got into the Polo Grounds, and that's where my brother was born in 1969, and that's where I was born in 1976. And so I lived in the Polo Grounds from birth until 1994, and in 1994 is when we made the move to Co-op City.

Sorry, I made a mistake in my email. I said I lived there for 40 years, it’s about 30 years on and off, but pretty much this family domicile is where I've been – call home. I went back to Harlem at one point, went back to live in Brooklyn at one point. But then I pretty much came – I've been pretty much here for the past, like close to 20 years as a resident. But even before that – so at that time, I came up here with my dad, my mom, my brother, and myself. And I was 18 at the time. And pretty much the way they came up, it was just similar to what – a lot of things happened. I think that – we were Central Harlem residents. But I think that, the crack, that what happened was that issues around safety was a big concern. And I think for many of us, the North Bronx had begun to open up to us. Like before that, there were mostly like ethnic enclaves. I'd always gone to school in the North Bronx. My brother went to school at Bronx Science, I went to school at the old Grace Lutheran, which used to be on the concourse, but it’s no longer there anymore - Bedford Park and Valentine Avenue. When we went to those schools, it was mostly a white ethnic enclave, you know what I'm saying? But once it began to open up to Black folks, a lot of us from Central Harlem began to go there because it was like, the rent was cheaper, or the neighborhoods were just safer, you know what I'm saying?

MN: ‘94 is the height of the crack epidemic.

KB: Yeah, ‘94 is the height of the crack epidemic. My dad is having conversations with my mom. He's concerned that I'm growing up to be a young man, my brother, who's seven years older than me - so I'm 18, my brother's 25. There's a concern about safety for the both of us, you know what I'm saying? And so they decided – and it was a tough decision because they were one of the first families to move into the Polo Grounds. So they had very deep ties to the community, but my dad was like, we'll make it work out, and they have a car and we'll drive and stuff like that. So ‘94, they came up here – they did make a decision to like – we want to move up here.

And I remember the first time I got up here, I got lost. I didn't know where I was going. And then I finally found it – because all the buildings look the same and they're like 80,000 of them. But when I finally found my building, 100 Archive Place, I remember I didn't have a key. I was looking for the buzzer, and the guy – there was a Jewish guy on the other side of the glass door. There was a buzzer, and I couldn't find the buzzer. I finally found the buzzer, I buzzed in – my mom buzzed me in, and the Jewish guy wouldn't let me in the door. But once I got buzzed in, the guy just looked at me, he nodded and said, "Hey, how you doing?" You know what I'm saying? Like, you're in the neighborhood now. You're in, you know what I'm saying? And at that time, I felt I was in. Because at that time, Co-op City was like a step-up. It was, for a lot of us, even those of us who were marginally around the Bronx, we had been around Bay Plaza maybe a little bit, but we had always seen that it was mythic in a lot of ways, that if you lived in Corp City, you were middle class – you kind of high class a little bit, you know what I'm saying? That's the way we felt a little bit. We're like suburbanites now. We're a different level, in a lot of ways. I remember just having little things like the New York Times Vendor Box, The Daily News Vendor Box, by the bus station. I can talk about the buses being called limousines, you know what I'm saying? That's what they're called – they're called the private bus company, they're the express bus, but they advertised it as your private limousine to the city, and that was a word that I never heard before. My sister had told us, and my mama said, it was like – we're going into the city now. So it is a whole different way of looking at the world. Does that make sense?

MN: Absolutely. One thing I wanted to ask is, what were your parents occupations when they moved to Co-op City? Were they different than when you moved to the Polo Grounds?

KB: So when we were in the Polo Grounds, it was the same occupation. In fact, it was funny – my mom and my dad, when they got into the Polo Grounds, my dad went from the garment industry into the post office. And my mom had went into NYU. She was actually the first African American patient unit clerk at New York University, and a member of 1199. So they were both part of that trade union, strong government employees, and those are jobs that they had that kept them in. And then my brother, at the time, he had just started working as a housing assistant, civil servant as well. He was living with us and I was a student at SUNY Old Westbury, which was wild. I would commute from Co-op – I would take the QBX 1 across to

Flushing, then go from Flushing to Long Island to go to school. And then I did that for two years before I came to sanity and I decided to transfer down to college where I ultimately graduated. All those things happen, but that's another story.

MN: Now, when you got to Co-op City, what was the demographic in 1994 that you experienced there?

KB: It was still pretty mixed, actually. There were a few – we had white neighbors. I remember having white neighbors on this floor. And lots of Latinos, and a lot of Black folks, Caribbean Black folks. I remember there was like – it was older Jewish people, a few younger white folks with their kids, and Caribbean folks and Puerto Rican folks, mostly. And for the most part everyone just got along. I think that as the years went by, more and more you saw that there was a stagnation of white Jewish folks. And the Jewish population began dying out. I think it was stark to me, maybe in 2007, when the big synagogue that was over on Dreiser Loop turned into a church. You know what I'm saying? That was the turning point for me. That was like – dang, that kind of happened. That was like – whoa, that's real. Cause I remember it was still – it was still very much – like the board was mixed. I think that at one point they had brought in a number of Russian Jewish people to come to my building, but nothing really stuck. I joke that there's three different white people who live in Co-op City. There's older Jewish people, there's the young people who come visit them during the holidays, and then there's always the urban planners [laughs]. I can always tell the urban planners because they always have these wild sneakers on. Sorry about that, anyway –

MN: [laughs]

KB: Anyway – but mostly – I would say that at that point, it was getting to core Black. And I think that was concerning. I think my parents were just like – The thing that internally we always talked about was just like, we never want this to be – and I hate to use this term, but I'm just gonna say it the way they said it, it's not something that I believe. But there was always this thing that said, we don't want to be the projects. You know what I'm saying? We don't want to be the projects, right? And there was just always this pressure, I think that for us as Black people

specifically in Co-Op City, to have this very specific pride in our community. We were just very on each other. For us, the building association, which is mostly of Black women, and at that time it was also some Jewish women, they would always very much be like, “Make sure your kids don't litter. Make sure your kids don't drop stuff,” you know what I'm saying? “Make sure your kids don't wild out.” Don't do anything that will make it seem embarrassing for us as Black people. Because there was a sense that if the community was going to be transforming from Jewish to Black, we didn't want to be in a situation where we would have that narrative – that stigma – that said, neighborhoods are bad because they're majority Black now. Which we know is not true. We know that it's systematic racism, it's the death of services, the garbage removal, it's a lot of these other factors. But for us, psychologically. And also psychologically, it was just like, we were homeowners now. And that was something different too.

MN: The Polo Ground houses had been NYCHA, New York public housing?

KB: Exactly.

MN: Now, was it low income or the middle income, the Polo Grounds?

KB: It was a mix at that time, but it was becoming more lower income And you can tell also that the devastation of crack had devastated a lot of – because crack was across the board, like generational, taking out families. It would be like, maybe the son and the dad would be having an addiction. Or the daughter and the aunt, and they all live in one household. It brought everything down. And then what happened was that small Southern community that we had, where we can really trust each other, was diminishing because people started stealing from each other. But I felt like we were always – my parents had a very steady rent And that rent was not market rent. And so we were very much like the middle class within the projects. At least I felt that way. You know what I'm saying? That extra money allowed us to go to – my parents would be like, all right, my children go into parochial school. Vatican II’s happening, so my brother's going to St. Charles Borromeo, I'm going up to Grace Lutheran, later I went to Cardinal Hayes.

MN: You went to Cardinal Hayes?

KB: Yeah, I went to Hayes. I played football for Hayes, and I played for Fordham Prep. All that. So my whole life was living on 155th and 8th Avenue. I'm right across from the Macombs Dam Bridge and it's basically this uptown mentality, because I'm just across the bridge. I'm in 161, I'm at Yankee Stadium, we're in Dykeman, we're in whatever. My dad drove, so it was just like – it was nothing to this thing about oh, the Bronx is over here. So for me, when I went to live in the Bronx, it didn't feel any different to me. The only thing that felt different was just like the two-fare zone. That was the only thing that was weird to me. Now I had to pay twice to get on the bus and to get on the subway. And while I was going to Hunter, that was a lot before the Metro card, before they start instituting that one fare. I really had to hustle. Sometimes I would go to Pelham and then – because the Pelham bus was a dollar, they had the dollar vans at one time. This is way before Uber. Sometimes I just had to walk it, just go to take the five train and go to Gun Hill Road and just walk home, if I didn't really have all the money. It's not like now, I think there's a little bit more liberalization around jumping the fair. I used to do that too sometimes, too, but it's just – Does that make sense? I don't want to be all over the place.

MN: How long did it take you to get to Hunter from Co-op City?

KB: Oh man, it was like – on a good day, it would just be like maybe an hour. I would just take the Pelham down to the 6 train, I'd be at Hunter Campus. And mind you, like I mentioned before, I had already started traveling, commuting, when I was at SUNY Old Westbury, and that would take me about an hour, 45 minutes, two hours sometimes, to get out to Westbury. I was young, I was used to it. It would be like an hour and 15 minutes to get down to Hunter.

MN: Now, one thing that strikes me as you're describing the attitude of the Black families who had moved to Co-op City, is it sounds exactly like what the families who moved into public housing in the early 50s did. We started out this research project interviewing people who grew up in the Patterson houses in the 50s. Everybody – if your children went wild, your neighbors were going to hold you to account. It was that kind of mentality. And then things got out of control eventually, by the sixties, but it sounds like in Co-op that mentality is still there.

KB: Yeah. It's a real mentality. Don't get us twisted. [laughs] Co-op people will snitch on you. We love you, but – you know what I'm saying? The big thing was like – there's a policy that allows dogs now, but there was a time when I first moved here that dogs were not allowed. Unless you were blind, or you had a disability, you were not allowed to have a dog. And I remember there was one neighbor we had, she had a little dog, she put it in her purse or whatever. And my mother was like, "I think she got a dog." You know what I'm saying? And anyone wanted to really get into it. But that was the thing. We really wanted to follow the rules, because I feel like – first of all, for us to get into Co-op City, it wasn't just the financial papers we had to give. We had to give a demographic of our household. First of all, not just a demographic of our household, we had to give pictures of everyone who lived in the house. And then they came to visit our house to make sure our house was clean.

MN: Really?

KB: Yeah, the people in Co-op City came to the Polo Grounds and did an inspection of our apartment in the Polo Grounds to make sure that we were like living light. And then we had to provide them pictures of everybody who lived there. I was like, what if we're ugly? [laughs] I was going to tell my brother, we didn't get in a Co-op City because of you. We had all the money, but this is because of your ugly ass. [laughs] No, but I'm serious. It was really serious. People don't understand. Now, I think, they don't go as deep as they used to do, but they went really deep because they really were like, this is an opportunity and a big thing, and you're a co-operative now. There was a level of just coming into that, and that's where I think – it became a thing where – and that's where you have the divide in the projects. These days, my philosophy is very much like, we're all one. We live in a block right now in the Northeast Bronx, we have the Baychester houses, we have the Edenwell houses, we have Co-op City. We all have the same concerns as a community. So we all gotta unite. It's all public housing, one way or another, you know what I'm saying? We all look the same. We have to all be united around that. At that time, being in Co-op was really hard, they were really scringing around some of that stuff.

MN: And of course, Edenwald was looked upon as a danger zone at that time.

KB: Oh my god, it was crazy. We didn't really understand, because it was like, we had wildness — this was something different, too, because the whole thing was The Valley and Co-op City, right? The fights that happened in Truman that were going on. And that was a whole other thing, in terms of Black culture, which is like internally – there was always a rumor, right? It was never substantiated, I don't know if it's true or not. There was always a rumor that was like, oh, they put the Black people over in Section 5, which is a section which is closer to the Hudson River side of the development. That's the Black section, you know what I'm saying? In a lot of ways, it's true, because Section 5 does have its own kind of vibe to it. That's where you had the Black barbershop, you had a little bit more of basketball tournaments. I live in Section 3, which is closer to Bartow, closer to the administrative hub of Co-op City, where the library is and that type of stuff. And it does have its own vibe. You can definitely see that Section 5, on the other side, has its own vibe that's different from Section 3, just in terms of Black culture, right? And so it's interesting to think about it in that way, but within that context too, like internal things. You learned about the whole thing between the Valley and Co-op City that would spill out into Truman at times, spill out in different bus stops. But by this time, I'm 18, 19 years old. I'm not as involved in that, but I'm witnessing it just on some casual shit, you know what I'm saying?

MN: Now, in terms of your family, your parents were trade unionists. Did they make you very aware of political issues and justice issues growing up?

KB: Oh, yeah. I would say my parents were very much…they were conscious. They were mainline Democrats. My dad was a Taurus, my mother was a Capricorn; they were just two practical people. They'd make the shit work. My mother was always a community based activist. She was always very pragmatic with her activism. She liked to do shit that worked, you know what I'm saying? She was like, "I'm bringing the plate of food. I'm visiting somebody. I'm doing the actual action." She wasn't a theoretician of that. My dad was similar, too. Very outgoing guy. The post office at that time was a time when there were a lot of Vietnam war veterans and a lot of Black folks coming into the post office, so it had a soul politics to it that I think that my dad had enjoyment with. And that spilled off into myself. I think that I benefited from it. Like for me, Sunday mornings was just like – my job was to go get my dad's cigarettes and my dad's newspapers. And it would be The Daily News, The Amsterdam News, The Times for my mom.

At that time, if they had a copy of the Daily Challenge. And then we would come home, and I would watch the McCrary Report, or I would watch Like It Is. It was just natural. My parents would cook breakfast and it was never forced upon us, but it was natural. And my dad, as a kind of patriarch – it's almost like, they have these stories talking about the Cuban cigars, and the guy used to be a reader, and used to read it like copies of Kapital as people were like rolling cigars. That was my dad on Sunday morning. He would read the newspaper and start shouting out his opinion. “Look what Koch is doing. Look at –”. And that was a way of me acculturating to myself my politics. But then conversely, too, I have my own thing going on. My brother's introducing me to Public Enemy, and then I'm listening to a lot of rap music. By 16 years old, I'm a self identified communist. Cardinal Hayes, yeah –

MN: You were a Cardinal Hayes communist?

KB: Yeah, I was a Cardinal Hayes communist. I'll show you my picture. First of all, you wanted the connections: fun fact, in my freshman homeroom class was Jim Jones. Not the California Jim Jones, but the rapper Jim Jones. Me and him, we shared a freshman homeroom together at Cardinal Hayes. So that's a fun fact. But I used to walk around – like 16 years old – I used to have my Lenin pin from the YCL, the Young Communist League. I used to have my copy of *People’s World*, along with my *Village Voice*. My classmates used to call me ‘village.’ Back in those days, if you were a little off-centered, you were considered ‘villagey.’ “Keith, he likes to hang out in the Village,” you know what I'm saying? That type of thing, that type of vibe. And, we were part of the whole scene, the fringe, but it was 92, 93; Los Angeles rebellion had just happened. There was a lot of anger, there was a lot of concern into the streets, and, yeah, I was definitely a rebel. Yeah. And no one liked me, I would say no one liked me – They loved me. I did really well at Hayes, but I definitely had my time with detention. But I was part of living in the Polo Grounds and living in a milieu of Harlem of this cycle of radicalism that happened. I think that some of it came uptown, too, and I met communists here in Co-op City. Co-op City had a huge – even though I was never a member of that organization – they had members of the PLP, Progressive Labor Party, who are up here. They did some organizing. I was close to a couple of them folks, but it was never my thing. But it’s out of respect, one red to another, even though we might disagree with each other. It's always like, salute, you know what I'm saying?

Like you're my comrade or what have you. They were around. But by this time, I think that 19, 20, 21, 22, Co-op City is more a place where I'm crashing than I'm organizing, right? I'm more going out to demonstrations. I'm going to Philadelphia, and I'm going to wherever, these types of things. Does that make sense?

MN: Yeah. In terms of your parents, did they join organizations and co-ops?

KB: No, my parents – my dad never joined. My mother joined a building association. It was very funny because my building association was a very strong – the building association was oftentimes a leap board into the board of directors. So my mom immediately joined their building association, and she got to know two of the board of directors who ended up being elected from the building association. She was always connected in that way. And the building association was an organization that – they do a lot of social life of the building, and so we're talking about disciplining the children. The other side of it too was that they provided things for the children to do. We did the Halloween party, the Christmas party. We had the building association meetings in case there was any concerns around the building, and so my mom was – I think she might have been like – if she wasn't a vice president, she might have been some sort of sergeant of arms. But she was never – again, she was very pragmatic. She was always somebody who was like, I'm doing it because she liked to be social, excited to help. But she was very much dedicated to, "What are we going to do right now? What's the action step?" So my mom was very involved with that. She was also involved with the National Council of Negro Women up here. She was also a member of the Co-op City Protestant Church. Co-op City Protestant Church used to meet downstairs where the library –

MN: Wow, so this was – they didn't actually have their own building yet.

KB: They didn't have their own building yet, yeah. My mother joined when they used to meet downstairs, and then she got really active when they moved over closer to – I don't know what the avenue was…it was Givens, I think. I don't know what the avenue is, but towards Gun Hill Road, where they–

MN: And they have a built – it is still called –

KB: Community Protestant Church, yeah.

MN: Community Protestant church, okay.

KB: Yeah. And that was like a big congregation here in Co-op City. That was huge. That was like, I don't know how big it is now. Cause I feel like once they moved, I think a lot of them got older and they didn't – I don't know. I can't speak to it, cause I'm not involved in it, so maybe they are stronger than I imagine. But she was involved in that and that was the center of her life here in Co-op City. She was very much in the know of it, but she was never politically ambitious. She would never actually run for anything, but she was loved and regarded. I remember, when she passed away four years ago, we got, you know – we have dope boys in Co-op City too – the dope boys came up to me being like, "I miss your mom. I'm so sorry your mom passed away." She touched everybody. She treated everybody – the guy's six four, five, six six, you know what I'm saying? Like hitters like, "Oh, Hey, Ms. Mitchell, can I hold the door for you?" Really sweet to them, and so I still feel like I have to act out on that legacy. I still go to building association meetings, cause I feel like I have to be part of that too, cause that's what my mom left us. Wherever my mom went, she was very much a practical activist. She was always grassroots, mostly, you know what I'm saying? Does that make sense?

MN: That makes a lot of sense. Now, was that church predominantly Black or were they – ?

KB: It was predominantly Black. It was a very Black, southern-oriented church. I think that it was huge because I think that they were – I think they would just say Protestant, they weren't specifically – I think it leaned more Baptist, but I think they would just – if you're Southern whatever, you're Methodist. Whatever. You are invited to this kind of congregational Black experience that they had at this church. I went to a few services there and it was a really good church and I enjoyed it. I would have kept going, me and my partner – I didn't mention too, that my son lives here now. So my son's second generation, born here. So me and my former partner,

we ended up going to another church, which is New Day Church, which is over on Mount St. Ursula campus. That tended to be a little bit more progressive.

MN: So that's Mount St. Ursula all the way near Fordham?

KB: Yeah. Mount St. Ursula, right by Bedford Park. Yeah, exactly. We went to church there. There was a smaller church called New Day that was – Greg Jost, that's how I met Gregory Jost.

MN: Oh, wow.

KB: Yeah, so Gregory Jost and I – Gregory went to that church. It was a progressive church that was founded by Doug Cunningham, Pastor Doug. We started going – we went there like in the teens, 2012, 2013, around that time. And that was a fixture in terms of the kind of progressive scene. That was inside the Ursula cafeteria, like I'm saying – like we were just going in there. This will wrap it up – my parents, my mom specifically, she was very much involved in it. My dad, on the other hand, he was like – listen, my dad liked to watch TV, he liked to play his numbers, he liked to play his lotto. He didn't like to do – you know what I'm saying?

MN: Oh, that raises a question. Was there a numbers – I know there had to be a numbers person in –

KB: There was definitely a numbers person. I can't remember who, but my dad was plugged in here somehow. But my dad – it was funny. My dad was plugged into the numbers heavy at home. Now, he used to hang out with this group called the Polo Ground Boys. The Polo Ground Boys were a group of guys that met in the parking lot at the Polo Grounds, and they would fix cars and do stuff like that. When he moved to Co-op City, he would drive down to Harlem and still hang out with the Polo Gun Boys. He would wake up on weekends – I know by that time, people started to move away, retire, get sick, whatever, but he still maintained that stuff. I remember one time, my dad had hit for maybe $5000, and then he brought me along with him. He didn't even tell me. He was just like, “Stay in the car and look tough.” [laughs] Because I was a big guy, you know what I'm saying. He got his money and shit like that. But my dad was

always plugged in. He definitely was like – his thing was, he liked to go downstairs. Bartow had a newsstand. He would play the lotto in the newsstand of Bartow, he would get the daily news there, he would get the number sheets, like the big Reds. That type of stuff. He would read the number sheets. But he still, on a weekly basis, went back to Harlem. He was always going back to see his boys.

MN: One thing that I'm getting from your descriptions is, was there a West Indian culture there that was separate from the Southern Black culture?

KB: Yeah, yeah. It was definitely – so there were like three different types of Black folks. You had the new people who came into Co-op City. First of all – you're talking about West Indian culture – my neighbor, she's from Jamaica. You wanna talk about generational wealth and how Co-op City's landed – like when I got here in '94, she was pregnant. That kid takes care of my kid now. You know what I'm saying? So you were talking about generational safety and wealth. Imagine being in a place that's generationally that long, that the kid that she was pregnant with has keys to my apartment. You know what I'm saying? Like nobody moves here, nobody's ready to move. The only time an apartment is opening is if people die.

MN: So people stay. This is an incredibly stable community.

KB: That's right. People stay. And that also adds to the safety because everyone knows each other. There's a lot of trust you have when you have people like that. But like the Newtons over here, they're Jamaican, and there was a few other Jamaican folks. The thing about Co-op City is – a lot of times people don't realize it – this is a landing spot for a lot of single mothers who want a safe place for their kids. So there's a lot of CNAs and nurses who live in Co-op City, who saved up their money to be like, I'm going to go live in Co-op City with my kids. They may or may not be like – there's a lot of married couples here, and I noticed that the Dominicans tend to be more married. There's a number of West Africans here now, and something that I heard is that the West Africans love Mitchell-Lama, because apparently, from what I understand, that over here at Tracey Towers – they have a majority at Tracey Towers right now.

MN: Yes, absolutely. West Africans are the majority there, especially from Ghana.

KB: Yeah, from Ghana. And it is a reflection of the Bronx. But in Co-op City, you see more sisters in Muslim garb, the West African garb these days. But it was very funny too, you also had people who lived here, and they're not around as much, but they tended to be a little bit more – they moved here when it first opened. They were the first Black – they tend to be a little bit more boulé. There's a woman called Miss Irma, and Miss Irma used to walk around with big sunglasses and she had her head up like she was Diane Carroll. You cannot tell her anything. She used to walk around here with a cigarette holder, and the leather gloves, and she was an epicenter of class. Every time you saw her, you were just like, oh my god, she's Black middle class. And she was really representing that real deep, because we were like Black middle class, but we were like Bill Cosby aspirational in a lot of ways. My mom used to have the same paintings in this place that we had in the Cosby show, and we were definitely an Ebony household. We were not a Jet household. My mother was like, we don't read Jet. We read Ebony. She read Ebony all the time. It was very middle class. But then you had these kind of real Black folks who were there like ‘69, ‘68, and they were very bougie, had their shoulders up in a kind of tense and walked in a certain way. Some of them are still around and I appreciate them. And we talk, and then they're also very politically active and stuff like that. But it was just funny, you know what I'm saying? But Miss Irma, she was killing me because she used to walk around with big sunglasses, like she was real, real – she was real high cotton. Yeah.

But now, you have the kids who are like semi lumped-in street kids. And because I grew up with them, I never saw them as a threat. I can tell you a story. My girlfriend was like – I was coming late from the mazes one time and my girlfriend is in front of my building, she's waiting for me to get home to let her in or whatever. And she was like, you know what I'm saying? She was like, I don't know, all these kids up front of the building and stuff like that, and I'm scared and there's a bunch of young kids. I was like, I've known those kids since they were wearing diapers. Those kids are fine, you know what I'm saying? They'll hold the door for you, whatever. But it turns out, they were having a self-organized one year anniversary for that man who died of cancer, and they had called all the buildings together. All the young people and a lot of people who weren't living in Co-op City anymore came to the memorial, and it was unannounced, cause it was not in

the newspaper, but they had the pictures of the guy and the candles and everything. Stuff like that happens, and we don't understand it because we're older people, and when we see – we've been unfortunately socialized to think that when we see a bunch of young Black people together, it must be a gang initiation, it must be something bad happening. But these young people self-organized a memorial for one of their homies, and I was just like, that's the type of community we live in. It's very self conscious of itself, people know each other, and there's a lot of pride.

MN: A couple of questions about businesses – You're part of the southern African American group there. I'm very aware of all the Caribbean restaurants along Gun Hill and White Plains Road. Were there any southern soul food spots there?

KB: You know what? It's so weird, because when I first moved here, it really was a meeting of Jewish culture. The diner was the dominant place, Seven Seas Diner and Townhouse Diner. Townhouse was over on Dreiser, Seven Seas over here on Bartow Avenue. They dominated – and also Palombo Bakery. They had a Palombo Bakery in the middle of Bartow Avenue, and let me tell you something, when they closed, we were so upset because it was just a nice touch to have a community, to be able to go to a diner. And now it's more – it's the times that change. And now the diners like a Chinese – what do you call those things, a take out spot or whatever, and the Palombo Bakery closed. Now it's a Dunkin Donuts, you know what I'm saying? At least they have Bagels on Bartow and stuff like that. It was still that kind of ethnic core, but then if you wanted to go deeper, like you said, you can get soul food and stuff like that. What I noticed is really crazy about Co-op City now, is that you still had barber shops along ethnic lines in Co-op City. The barbershop on Dreiser was still cutting mostly – dad European barbers in it, Eastern European barbers in it, assuming Jewish hair, right? There was Kenny's 1 and Kenny's 2, Kenny's 1 was over at Section 5, which I mentioned before, was known to be mostly African American culture, and that was like a hub of that. That was an old school Black barbershop, and you went in there, you saw portraits of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and stuff like that. Then you had Kenny's 2, which was the offshoot of it, which is closer to me, which was a little bit more shabbier, but it had a function or whatever.
What I notice now, is that the Dominicans have franchised – the same way they have franchised all the supermarkets in this neighborhood – they've franchised all the hair care products in the

neighborhood. So now all the barbershops in the neighborhood are controlled by one Dominican guy. And he just consistently has gone, whenever a barbershop is closed or about to close, he just goes and buys it and he staffs it with his people. So now there's five Dominican barber shops. And I'm not gonna lie, Dominicans can cut some hair. You know what I'm saying? And I think what happened was that the sisters, the Black women, they went to the Dominicans first to get the blowouts, to get their hair straightened. Because I remember my sister used to go and be like, yo, the Dominicans straightened the shit out of my hair. They did this, you know what I'm saying? And that day they combed that shit, they said thin combed down shit. And so I think that the sisters, Dominican sisters, thought the brothers were – the brothers were like, oh, there's money in hair care for Black people. So like, why don't we start cutting some hair? So then the Dominicans start cutting the hair, and once Dominicans start cutting the hair, it was a wrap. And they're Black as fuck, you know what I'm saying. But like, on some nationalist shit, I should really be going over to Gun Hill and getting my haircut over there. But shit, man. I ain't lie, these motherfuckers come in with the hot towels, and it's a whole thing. I'm sorry. Did I – I'm sorry.

MN: This is perfect. No, this is exactly what we're hoping to get. [laughs]

KB: So anyway, that's what I'm saying. But what I would say too, is that there was a lot of fight, because I think that what happened was that – my mom was also part of the consumer kind-of – there was a sensibility around Black Harlem housewives, around shopping, that was connected to activism. And we never talk about that. My mom always went to the supermarket with coupons, and she was always getting rain checks, and she was always really advocating on the level of food. And we don't really give a lot of credit to Black women activists who do that on a day to day level, who feed their families. Also to Caribbean activists, who were also just making sure the fruit and the produce was fresh. Because wherever you see a significant Caribbean community, you're seeing fresh produce. That's what I noticed when I was living in Flatbush. The Carribean women just did not play. They'll pick up a coconut, they pick up something that – this shit's trash, they throw it back, and they won't buy it. I know that if I want to get fresh produce, I go to Liberty Avenue, I go to Flatbush. I go wherever the Caribbean core is because I know the women don't play like that. And my mom was also a big part of that. Shopping was a big deal for my parents. Having a supermarket – we had a Pathmark over here, and now being a

Stop & Shop – on both sides of the development. And then also being able to go across the bridge to the fancier ones, if we wanted to. Now we have Fairway, and if I wanted to we can drive up a little further north. The shopping thing has become a convenience. And it's funny, too, because I think within Co-op City, we tend to drive out of Co-op City to go shopping. For myself, I won't go to the Stop & Shop over here on Bartow, because that's the one that – I don't go to Bay Plaza. Bay Plaza is basically the suburbs for all of the Bronx. It's always so crowded. So what I try to do is I try to go out to the suburbs. I try to go in the back way, behind the thing. I go to Scarsdale, I get my brother to drive me up to whatever, to get me to a quieter place to go shopping. That's what I try to do, and it has a lot to do with the fact that it's just super crowded over there.

MN: So Bay Plaza now services the entire Bronx?

KB: So there's only – so you realize that, this just happened recently, the Grand Concourse movie theater closed down. So the only movie theater that we have in the Bronx now is at Bay Plaza. That's the last movie theater. When I first moved to Co-op – now I sound real old – when I first moved to Co-op City, right, what you had at Bay Plaza was Kmart, you had Rickel, and that was pretty much it. And then you had little restaurants, you had the bagel place that was 24 hours, you had the Ponderosa Steakhouse, and you had a Foot Locker. It was really anchored by – and then don't forget in the 2000s, the bustling place was Barnes & Noble. Everybody was hanging out at Barnes & Noble back in the day. You have study group, you took your kids and played the Duplo. They had really, they're out there. Then what happened was they expanded the mall, so now there's Bay Plaza, and then there's the mall at Bay Plaza, and then with the expansion came more parking. So now there's a supermall that has the Apple store, has the Macy's, has the JC Penny's. And so a lot of people go shopping there and it tends to be a big kind of big parking lot. I think that has shifted a lot because it used to be a little bit more – I remember that Red Lobster that's across the street from me. I was like, they ain't never gonna close that Red Lobster. That Red Lobster been around since – when my brother graduated from Hunter, my dad took us to that Red Lobster for graduation. You know what I'm saying? I joke with people, I was like, listen, you don't take people out to City Island for the first date. Take them to Red Lobster

for the first date. See how it works out. Then you gotta work their way out to City Island. You know what I'm saying? Yeah, then you go take them out to Jimmy's or whatever.

MN: Okay, so that raises the question: was City Island an extension of Co-op City culture?

KB: Absolutely. I go to City Island all the time. Summertime – one of the demands that I've always had with our city councilman is that we should have a specific bus from Co-op City to Orchard Beach. Could you imagine having seniors be able to go to Orchard Beach and be able to walk by the water during the day? It would be good for our community. There's just so much obesity and health issues, it would be nice to have a dedicated bus from Co-op City. One of the things I got upset about was the fact that there was actually a bus that traveled from Co-op City directly to City Island. They had to cut that bus into two sections because City Island only has one entrance, and it was taking all day for that bus to get to City Island. So now they have a City Island shuttle that goes to Pelham Bay Park, then goes from Pelham Bay Park to Co-op City. And then from Co-op City, you have to go to Co-op City, to Pelham Bay Park, and take that shuttle to City Island. But yeah, I, but regularly go there. Like for me, it's an extension of the specialty of this area, just be like, "Hey let's go to City Island out for dinner." I tell my dates, I tell my girlfriend at the time, "Hey, wanna go to City Island," you know what I'm saying? We'll go to the beach. I take my son to the beach, during the time, and it's fun. Again, it is a good extension, and it's part of the beauty of it. I wish that we had more entryways into Pelham Bay Park, 'cause I feel like Pelham Bay Park feels like the wilderness, so people don't use it as much. We go to Prospect Park – this is someplace where you can land, you feel like you step out of the city. And once you're out of Pelham Bay Park, it's like – but it's nice though. It's nice. You can sit out, it's beautiful. Orchard Beach is beautiful. Absolutely, yep. It's good stuff, and it has a ferry now too. So I think the next step – I think the next extension has to be either figuring out how to do a ferry at Co-op City, or figuring out how to get more people to know about the ferry at Ferry Point. Because once you're on a ferry, that's a game changer. Once I'm on that ferry, you can get to Rockaway Beach in an hour and a half. It's great.

MN: Wow. I haven't run out of questions, but I want to let other people ask certain things, because I think we're going to have to do a second interview with you. First of all, I think you should write a book about Co-op City.

KB: Yeah. I gotta write a book about a lot of things, Mark. You know what I'm saying? [laughs] Let me talk about that, because I just feel like there's a lot of stuff – because I just feel like these interviews help me a lot, because I think as activists, one of the things that we don't – one of the things we're always fighting for is we're always dealing with the immediate, and we don't have a chance to really reflect. I think that as much as I'm – I feel like you're doing a favor to me too, because now at least it's on the record. It's saying what I need to say. It's archived. It can be of use – if it is of use, then good. If it's not, what have you, but at least it's there. And I feel much more self conscious around that, and I also feel the beauty, because my dad – my dad told me a lot of the stories of when he grew up in New York City, and he was very specific around very specific places that he went to in Harlem, where he went to in Uptown, how he had to navigate that stuff. And I – now that Jennifer, now my mother and my dad both passed away, there's a very specific…not even an onus, but I'm gonna say a responsibility I think we have to tell these stories, because they need to be passed on for these other younger people. They didn't have the experience, and they don't know what it means to have this diffic–

MN: Is your dad still alive?

KB: No, my dad passed away in July, and he was our Patriarch. I'll tell you, for example, they used to be like – in Harlem, there were different bars for different states from where you came from. So if you were South Carolinian, you hung out either at the Andrews or the Baron. That was a South Carolina bar. And there was a North Carolina bar, and a Georgia bar. You know what I'm saying? The same way even today that there's bars that have specific football flags outside, and say that if you're a Raiders fan, you come watch Raiders here or whatever, that's how it was in Harlem. And in this correspondence, when she and my dad – my grandmother, she had had surgery, she was an amputee from diabetes. She was like, "I know I had surgery, but I know I'm going to find a way to New York to get to Andrews." Andrews was this kind of symbol in South Carolina, like in their imaginary of high Harlem sophistication. Like, you made

it, you know what I'm saying? It's almost like a Mecca, akin to the Apollo, you had to go there and hang out. It's one of the things that we don't reckon with, is that those bars were deeply embedded in the social life of Harlem, and how people developed and stuff like that, and also embedded in like, where not to hang out in. I remember there was a bar when I was growing up called the Third Planet. And my mother was like, "you're not supposed to be on the same side of the street as the Third Planet." Now I can't even afford an apartment on the block that the Third Planet was on in Harlem, you know what I'm saying? It's just like those things that you just remember. You have to have actual – you had to be there, but then you can tell the stories. And I think part of it is like, for us, in the face of gentrification, it's just the same thing I say all the time in all my talks: In the anti-colonial war against the Portuguese, the Mozambicans were always like, "You can bomb our schools, you can bomb our clinics, but the institution is with the people." And as long as we have the people and their historical memory, we can always rebuild those other institutions that you destroyed, you know what I'm saying? That's the importance of these types of projects, is that I don't want Black people to forget. I really don't – particularly our people, I don't want us to forget, I don't want us to get caught up out there, we need to slow down and be able to – but anyway, anyone has got questions? I budgeted a lot of time today, but I know you guys got other things to do. But let me know if there's any other questions. I don't want to take up too much of your time.

MN: Let me just lay one thing on, which is that I think our next interview should focus on bringing up a child in Co-op City, that whole experience.

KB: Oh, yeah, that's crazy.

MN: Because I think that's a whole other thing. But why don't we finish up with the questions from the rest of our folks, and then we'll schedule a second interview because this is truly extraordinary.

Stephanie Robinson-Ramirez (SRR): Can everyone hear me? Hi, so I will just probably lead us to our next segment. I just want to know a little bit about your role as executive director of –

correct my pronunciation if I’m wrong– Maysles. Can you tell us what initially drew you to the organization?

KB: Okay, yeah, sure. So at the time that Maysles came around, I was already coordinator at the Brecht Forum, and that was all the way down in the Village, on Bethune and West Street, in an artist cooperative called Westbeth Artist Cooperative. And we were on the ground floor there. And we would get flyers from time to time from this new organization called Maysles, that was doing documentary film screenings up in Harlem. I was like, this is very interesting for us. And the first time I actually went to Maysles was for a panel discussion. It was around the time that Manning Marable had dropped that book around Malcolm X, and it was a very controversial book, right? I think that on that panel discussion was Amiri Baraka, Nellie Bailey, the imam from a local mosque, a Black Panther, like Omowale Clay from the December 12th Movement, and me, and I'm like a little midget. And then on top of that, there was this white dude who's filming the whole time thing. I was like, who the fuck is this white guy filming? And he was like, it's Al Maysles. Albert Maysles. He was a founder of the place, famous documentarian, *Grey Gardens, Gimme Shelter*, what have you. That was my first experience with them. And then over the years, when I was at Rosa Luxemburg, I had made a really deep commitment that I always wanted to do things uptown. For the first time I had a budget, I had an opportunity to bring in world class speakers. I did things in Schomburg, I did things at the Malcolm X Center, the Audubon. I did a thing at Brook Park. I was just like, I want to focus on building uptown civil society as much as possible. That's where I'm from, this is where I think it's needed, what have you. And one of the places I always landed was Maysles. In between that time, too, there was a lot of organizing that's happening in film, so my name will come up and I end up going to film conversations and doing things of that nature. Then this past spring, I had done a series called Lafargue Clinic, which I invited Mark – actually, thank you Mark. You’re a protagonist in this, you helped me get my job. Because this was such an impressive run of film that we did on the first mental health clinic in Harlem that was founded by the CP, the Communist Party left, and an Austrian psychoanalysis, and the Black Gospel Church, Social Gospel Church, all coming together to provide mental health care. And the series was a success. It was a lot of success, it was tremendously popular. We had Mark come in and do a wonderful lecture that's a really rare

16 millimeter documentary that was produced by the Communist Party for Ben Davis, and Mark gave a brilliant talk.

At that time it was just like luck. They had an executive director job opening, I was looking for a job, I was like, all right. I apply, they liked me. And I fit in and it all worked out. You know what I'm saying? And it was just like – it was timing. It was luck. Also, it was what my heart was. And I think now – it was also just part of overall, with cinema, is that right now in the city – because what you're seeing now in the city is that there's a blossoming of cinema that's happening, and people want these types of spaces to meet. I know there's a young man over here in the mainland, who's trying to go to the cinema here in the Bronx, and we need more – we need as many different – we need like one, two, three, many micro cinemas. There's a micro cinema out here in City Island, and so we need to have those experiments of democracy that allow people to be able to meet, to talk, to have conversation, and to build. We need a democratic infrastructure. Beyond voting, we need democratic infrastructure for participation year-round. And so that's what things are at right now. I wanted to play with that. And yeah, here I am, six months in, still learning a lot. It's different. It's different being on the other side of the desk, but I have a really great team and it's been a wonderful experience. I encourage folks, please come down to Harlem, we're right there, 127, Malcolm X, right across the street from ? Number 7.

MN: That experience of talking there still has all these reverberations and contacts emerging out of it. It's one of the really special places for intellectual political vitality in New York City.

KB: Thank you. I would just say, it's in the tradition of that speaker's corner, that place where people have gathered, we meet, we talk, 127th Street, 125th Street, like all those places where that concentration and understanding of literature and life, and – you know what I'm saying? It's funny, because we've been able to create – we're trying to create a coalition. At least in my mind, it's very much like 1199, very much what I learned from my parents and what I learned in my own political life, was like multiracial coalition in service of Black liberation. Multiracial coalition in service of women liberation. You know what I'm saying? Those are the things that I think – those are the core lessons that we had, those rainbow coalitions are the core lessons, and centering that around love. It's a core lesson that we have to grab from the 60s on to now, that

we're really challenging in our political moment right now. This is the moment that we call for that right now. I think that, a lot of times people, they walk into Maysles, they're like, "Is this a church group?" No, we're not the Mormons. [laughs] We're a cinema house, we do arthouse cinema, we do film, but we do have that political edge too that you feel. That's what you feel, is that affirmation, being pro-uptown, pro-Black liberation, pro-multiracial coalition.

SRR: I guess in relation to that same question, can we talk about the power of film and its relation to community activism, particularly from your experiences in your career?

KB: Oh man. So I would just say that the power of film is that – film is amazing because it's a very low bar. It doesn't require a lot of literacy. And also it's very active, for us as activists, to really understand the means of production by looking at film. Film is built on a Fordist model that really is about top down assembly line production. The directors in conversation with the editors, the cameramen, all this stuff that's really trying to do that, right? And then I think that what happens is that once you have that understanding, you can remix that and recreate that and then create something that's different. What I've been taught is that there's a first, second, and third cinema, right? The first cinema is the cinema of Hollywood, which is Dr. Porter's model, which is a blockbuster. The second cinema was that of the emergence of the artists and the auteur, the director's voice. And the third cinema is the cinema of the oppressed, right? The oppositional cinema, the anti-imperialist cinema.The cinema that seeks to create a space of transformation, a view of social relationships. I come mostly out of a second and third cinema tradition, and I was actually trained at Third World Newsville, which is also an important institution as well. So that third cinema approach allows us to really have that breakdown, not only just for the producer, but also for the viewer, and like allowing those lines to blur a little bit. And that also goes down to the level of production, because in terms of the Russian film or Cuban film, it's more about the collective, right? It's more about – it's not like I'm the director, I tell you what to do. It's, I might be the director on this particular project, but on your project, I'm going to be the sound man. And on that project, I'm going to be the actor. You know what I'm saying? We're just exchanging these roles as part of this understanding of what production is and overcoming a lot of these hierarchies. And I think that's something that I think that I get out of film, that I'm trying to teach people all the time, is that once you know the rules, you just start to

break them down a little bit more and have the understanding. And that's what happens in society too, right? Us, when the working class becomes self conscious of itself and its historical role, then it can be able to be in a position to shift society. We don't need bosses anymore. We can actually go and start to reconstitute society, according to – what Mark said – from each according to their need, each according to what they produce, to each according to their need. You know what I'm saying? And that's something that I'm aiming to do. Film is a part of that because film allows you that space to think about those things. But also as an audience – it's also a way for you to create an audience too, and I think that's something I'm excited about. And like some of the films we screen, we always do it education wise. So in the cinema, we have 50 seats. It's like a little living room. Sit down, get your popcorn. Everything else you do in the movie theater, but afterwards, we have a really deep conversation and you really have an understanding of how the world works deeper then, afterwards.

SRR: I just have one more final question, maybe for the next segment. What do you believe is your legacy that you will leave behind in regards to fellow Harlem and Bronx Natives?

KB: Oh man, shit. I don't know. To me – I'll be honest with you – I think that for me I try to be in the tradition of people who came before me. And I have to be honest with you, when I was a young man and I used to go to CP headquarters, I'd see these big pictures of Claudia Jones and Ben Davis and W. E. B. Du Bois. And this – mind you – this is before diversity, equity, and inclusion, right? So I'm 17 years old, I'm going to a corporate office building, and I'm doing like – it's kinda like my job, right? I'm a young rouser, but think about what it means to me to be 17 years old and seeing pictures of Black people in a boardroom and connecting that to my own liberation. You know what I'm saying? So for me, that's what it means for me to be part of the Black radical tradition. And that Black radical tradition is also something that I think that – it's around a certain level of generosity. That means that if I have something, I have to be able to give it away. It's not mine to keep. It's part of life, because my liberation is entangled in your liberation. And so I try to do that every single day. I try to be generous. I try to look out for people. To me, those are the core values of uptown that I always try to ascribe to. Good looking out G, you know what I'm saying? That's uptown politics. Looking out for your people. And that's what I want to do too, and I learned that from examples of people like Richard Wright,

who was just like – we wouldn't have a James Baldwin if it wasn't for Richard Wright. Like his generosity, to be like, “Yo, James, here's a fellowship for you to go to Paris.” Even though James put a knife in his back, don't get me started. Anyway, it's gonna be – you know what I'm saying? It's okay, but that's fine. Things have to happen that way sometimes. So I think that's important for me too. I want people to have the understanding, and that's part of life. You gotta give it all. That's all you can do, just gotta give it all, gotta give it up. But I let people know – because there's always two sets of archives, like this is what I want you to know, and there's someone that – and I'm glad I'm doing this, too, because what I do – I'm someone who produces events, and so I don't have too much of an archive. I'm sometimes afraid that a lot of it is going to be a lot of vibes. So I'm going to have to let y'all – allow y'all to reconstruct what it actually means. And it's not to say – what it means and what is of use, I think also, I have to let that go too. You know what I'm saying? I have to be like, does it make a difference? I always tell people – people don't know about Porkchop Davis. People don't talk about this person, don't want to talk about Porkchop Davis. And Porkchop Davis was important. He taught Malcolm how to speak. Or Bill Epton. You know what I'm saying? Giant. How come we don't have a Bill Epton biography? Giant. Anyway…

MN: Wow. Shellae, Steven, do you have questions, before we cut for the next one, because I think we could easily do another 90 minutes about education, child rearing.

Dr. Steven Payne: (SP): Shellae, do you want to go first? I definitely have questions, but some of the questions might be whole new sections.

KB: Go ahead.

Dr. Shellae Versey (SV): I was just going to say the same thing. I didn't want to take us too much too much further because I do have quite a few questions that I think might be a little more detailed. But you go ahead, Stephen. I've been enjoying this conversation, though, by the way–

MN: Why don't we do this – Each of you ask one question, we stop, and then schedule another interview, which will start off with the questions you didn't ask, and then head into the child

rearing/parenting dimension. So one question and then Stephen one and then we shut this amazing conversation down.

SV: Yeah, amazing conversation. Okay, I'll go. I'll go ahead and go. So I think just picking up on that thread about being in different traditions, I was struck by what you were saying before, in terms of the great migrations and like the hub of uptown, and I was wondering if you could just – so in addition to when you felt like your family was leaving uptown to move to Co-op City, were you seeing that happening? And then I guess I'm thinking, in that southern cultural hub that was around the area, how have you seen the forces of the city – the descendants of those people – do you see that current still in Co-op City? Or do you feel like people are moving back down South, given maybe these ties between sort of southern states in New York?

KB: Should I answer now? Or should I wait for the next one? I can answer it now. I definitely feel like more people are moving down South. In fact, it's funny because, the past four years, before I took this job, I was living down South. I was coming back and forth between Charleston and New York to take care of my dad. My dad lived on Gullah Islands, on Wadmalaw, right off of John's Island, 15 miles from the first stoplight. And so I was like, deep– so me and my sister – my mom passed away June 20th, 2020. That same day, my sister flew to Charleston to be with my dad, and she stayed for four years. During that time, it was a whole pandemic. So while the pandemic is like not a good thing, it was a blessing in disguise because we had a whole remote work thing and it allowed – under a normal situation my sister would have had to come back or we had to bring my dad back. And that time too, I was also leaving my job, so I actually lived down South. So I have the experience, and I can tell you that it is shifting the political landscape, because a lot of people – I can tell you that my mom, when she went down in 2008, she went down in the midst of the Obama campaign. And so she helped to – she's part of the people that are helping Charleston turn into this blue dot in the sea of red. And that's shifting. But what you're having up here, though, is that unfortunately, you're having a loss of political power, because now those central places that have Black constituency – which is a Co-op City, right? You have Northeast Bronx, Jamaica, Queens, Central Brooklyn, Harlem. And those are the places that I think are the centers of Black political power. But, that's also leading towards, as those places are shrinking, you're also shrinking your naturally occurring social democratic base,

and it's forcing things to the right. You know what I'm saying? And there's not – and the same thing with the Puerto Ricans as well. That Puerto Rican Black coalition is shrinking. And so that's something that's a concern of mine. And that's why I'm always repping uptown. I'm always uptown because we have to let people know that we're still here. We're up here, and we need to be politically organized, and we need to really have this as a base to shift citywide politics. So that's the big thing that I think that we need to focus on, and that's why I still live here. I want to continue to try to – I've been dabbling into a little politics here and there in Co-op City. We'll talk about that a little bit more, but…yeah.

SP: Okay, great. So I'll just build off of that question rather than get into entirely new terrain, then save that for the next one. But you mentioned a couple of different organizations, including the church that your mom was involved in. I was just wondering if you could speak to what are some of the live, most active organizations that you see around Co-op City right now?

KB: Yeah. Some of the live, active organizations – it's definitely the church organizations, because there's just that number of different organizations that exist, so there's a number of different faith communities. To be honest with you, what I see as alive is the actual gathering of people. So, for example, the various fairs that we have during the summertime, the various Fourth of July celebrations we have; those are things that really remind us of our strength as a community and they're super important in terms of having us organized and having us out there and just to meet and greet as a community. And then, I think that this is a very civically engaged, socially conscious community. And a number of the different – there's not a lot of gossip that goes around in Co-op City. A lot of the chatter tends to be about politics. You know what I'm saying? It tends not to be about somebody else's neighbor. If it is, I'm not in that. What do they say, "that's not my 'For You' page?" [laughs] You know what I'm saying? It's different. When I talk to my neighbors, it's mostly about politics. For example, the biggest political thing that's facing Co-op City right now is the amount of maintenance increases that we've had to take on for the past – we've had 11 percent maintenance increases in the past two years. And the question around affordability. And the second thing is also just – and I also plug in, maybe just for another conversation, is how Co-op City is going to change in five years once the Metro North comes here. The Metro North is threatening to shift all the political landscape of the East Bronx, from

Van Ness all the way to Co-op City. And so that's concerning a lot of existential people – existential concerns – because we're sitting here thinking, “Is Corp City still going to be affordable?” You know what I'm saying? Because now, with access, people are like, “Oh my God of course I'm gonna live in Corp City.” And with that shift in dynamics. I think that the thing for us is that, for the next five years, I would say that it's important for us to be organized. Self-consciously organized. We need to like – a lot of people from the outside have looked at Co-op City as an oasis. I think that there's something poetic about that; there's something poetic about us shifting our – when you think of New York City, you always think about the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, but what it would mean to shift our gaze away from capital, towards the Bronx. And what does that mean to have that energy towards organizing the Bronx and organizing our people? And I think that's going to be the challenge for the next five years.

MN: Wow. That's a great point to end this first interview. There's so much here that we all have to process. And so thank you so much Kazembe. We will get this transcribed and up on our digital site as quickly as possible, so you can share it as well. People all over the world will be able to access this when we do it. And they do, by the way. My friends in other countries – you know, this will be available to them, and then Stephanie and I will try to arrange another interview sometime in the next two weeks, and if necessary, we'll do a third one. But again, what a great way to begin this Co-op City – you brought this community to life, in a way that I don't think anybody else ever has, at least not in this depth. Thank you and to be continued.

KB: Thank you all so much. It's really a pleasure talking to you.

MN: And your photos are already up on Facebook and Instagram, because I move fast.