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**Appolon, Jean, Oral history interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis, March 20, 2018;
Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project; Cambridge Historical Society**



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Oral History Interview with Jean Appolon

Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis on March 20, 2018

at Andala Café, Cambridge, MA

LR: My name is Lina Raciukaitis and this is an oral history recorded as part of the Cambridge Historical Society Caribbean oral history project. Today is Tuesday March 20th, 2018 and it is around 1:30 p.m. We're at the Andala coffee house in Cambridge Massachusetts with Jean Appolon. Jean, do you consent to being recorded for this interview?

JA: Yes I do.

LR: All right. So I'm gonna start with some questions about your personal details and life history. So first, what is your full name?

JA: My full name is Jean Josue Appolon

LR: And when and where were you born?

JA: I was born in Haiti in September 1975.

LR: What town were you born in?

JA: Right in the capitol, yup, in the middle of the capitol of Haiti.

LR: So, did you grow up there?

JA: I grew up there until the age of 16.

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LR: And then at 16 what happened?

JA: At 16 and we dec- we did not decide to come here but my mother decided to get us out of Haiti, cause my mother was already living here in Boston since 1987. So my father was killed in 1991 due to political problems. So Haiti wasn't safe anymore for us to be there.

LR: And what are the names of your mother and father?

JA: My mother's name is Lucienne Duvielice [sic], my father's name is Erns Appolon [sic].

LR: And what did they both do for a living, when they were in Haiti?

JA: My mother was a schoolteacher and after that she used to work for a factory called GTE. GTE is the company that used to make all phones like those old phones that we used to have around Haiti and also around the world. And my father was working as a deputy for anti-drugs coming in to Haiti.

LR: Was the company that your mother worked for an American company or Haitian company?

JA: It was an American company.

LR: Ok, did she work with a lot of other people from Haiti and other places?

JA: She worked most mainly with a lot of people from Haiti who was working the factories and the directors were mostly also Haitians. And the head person, the owner, was American.

LR: What was her experience like at the company?

JA: I was very young when my mother was working there. But I know that she used to leave the house by 5 o'clock in the morning and coming back home around like, 11:30 midnight. So it was a full time job and sometimes traveled to Panama or, Dominican Republic, or Puerto Rico to buy goods and to come and re-sell it in Haiti. So to me I feel like my mother was working like a robot. She was always...awake and she was always working hard. So. That's what I can remember. And my father too, my father was always, you know, every morning he will be at

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work sometimes he doesn't even come home because if there are things going on in Haiti he will be like, you know, out for, you know for days.

LR: Was you father's job part of, like, a government job of?

JA: It was part of the government.

LR: Ok. And did he have that while you were still living in Haiti, he had that job the entire time?

JA: Yes, he had that job.

LR: And do you have any siblings?

JA: Yes I have two brothers. I have other brothers and sisters but I don't really know all of them.

LR: Are they older or younger?

JA: I have maybe two older brothers. One of them that I know but the ones that I don't know. I think the rest are younger than me.

LR: Did you live with those two brothers? Did you grow up with them?

JA: I grew up with my two brothers from my mother's side and father's side.

LR: And what were their names?

JA: Patrick and Junior.

LR: So what was your family like growing up?

JA: It was fun, being in a house with my mother, father, grandmother. Brothers, sometimes uncles and aunts will come around a lot to visit. So it was pretty fun. It's just like, we had to go to school every day and we had to pretty much follow the rules every day. But also to myself I

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decided to start dancing when I was maybe 12, to go to a dance school, and my father was furious about that, because he did not want me to dance. And my mother was kind of very tired of Haiti because I think around 1996, that's the time the Duvalier dictatorship just took an end, so my mother decided to, just starting to look for a way to get out of Haiti. And after my mother left Haiti I decided also to – I cannot wait for the day that she can, you know, get us out of Haiti because there were a lot of coup happening in Haiti, every three months almost. So we had a president pretty much every three months, a new president. And Haiti was very unstable and very violent. And, we decided to, you know, to be in hiding a lot because my father starting to get persecuted a lot so we were hiding in different places over on Haiti. Sometimes you know we even go almost we're on Dominican Republic. Sometimes we are in the south side of Haiti and the day that they killed my father, it was 1991 it was a Monday – January 11, 1991 my father got killed and, it was chaos for us and after that we decided to be in hiding also for six months and after that I went back to school for another year and a few months, and my mother decided to get, you know, to get us out of Haiti and move to Boston. January, 13 – no, June 13, 1993.

LR: And when you were moving around where you still attending school or –

JA: Yup – attending school and I was in a congreganate school, so the schools were very demanding and for me not being there and be able to do all my studies, was a little bit painful, but, you know when we come back I try to really follow and keep my studies going and until we left Haiti.

LR: And was the dance school separate from –

JA: The dance school was very separate

LR: – the main school

JA: The dance school was pretty much of the hills of Haiti called Picconvili. And my father was completely very furious. But after that I spent pretty much maybe six to eight months in that school and my father was saying no we cannot go all the way up there on the hill because we were leaving the capital and the downtown so I stopped going there and I went to another school, in mid-town named Viviane Gauthier but it's pretty much folklore. The second school

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that I went pretty much was traditional folklore and a bit of pace of like, you know, not ballet, but pretty much movement. But the first school that I went was a ballet school mainly so, a little bit of folklore but I didn't really enjoy it too much.

LR: What made you decide to go to that first dance school?

JA: Because they gave us a scholarship. I was sitting down in my school, I think I was in my first year of high school and they came and they said whoever wants to dance raise their hands. And I was the only male dancer who raised their hand and every other boys were like, how are you gonna go to that school – this is girls stuff, this is gay, this is – but I decided to go and I think there were three other girls. They kept one girl and they kept me and...that girl didn't even stay. So I just stayed for eight months but the school was OK just like I think it was too rigid. And to... too not good for my spirit. So I went to the second school and the second school really helped me to become who I am today.

LR: And did you have previous dance experience before you started the first one?

JA: Never, I was just watching TV and watching dance a lot on TV because that time Haiti had electricity 24/7. We never had blackouts at that time. Never. So, when I grew up my father was always seeing me interested in dance and TV so he was like why don't you try to do martial arts and I'm like, No I don't want to do martial arts. But I was watching this lady named Lavinia Williams who was an African-American woman who studied with the Alvin Ailey and danced with the Alvin Ailey also too – decided to move to Haiti and open pretty much the first art school. The first – first state art school they opened, it was directed by her, in Haiti, and she was teaching every day at that school. So but on Sundays they always broadcast them on TV and I would be sitting down watching TV and my father come and shut the TV out. So, to me that was... it was great to really see this woman who doesn't know anything about Haiti, kind of like came with her kindness and really wanted to share something. And she didn't even speak the language because her Creole was very difficult. So, but she stayed in Haiti and she even died in Haiti, around 1986 or something like. So I never had a chance to study with her but I was watching her a lot on TV but when I first started my own dance program in Haiti, I started my dance program at the same school that she started. You know, that she built – so the name on the door where I go, it's still her name on the door so to me it was very impressive and very inspirational.

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LR: Did you ever get to take any classes with her or go to her school?

JA: Never... Never, and just – but I started my own dance program in 2006 at the school that she opened in Haiti, but it was many years later after she died. So to me I think, I don't know, even though I never met her but in spirit I feel like you know somehow she's guiding me. You know, to my purpose.

LR: And what's the name of your program?

JA: The program is Jean Appolon Expressions and we do summer dance intensive for young kids from the age of six up to the age of twenty-five. But we, (sighs) we can only have space for seventy-five kids because the space that we use is like a hotel, but we build our own dance floor, but other thing we have a lot of trees and stuff so it kind of helps the kids think better and breathe better. But in Haiti we're trying to really see if we can have a school there hopefully soon. But, we're still working on it.

LR: And so, the first, so the first dance school that you went to was more of a ballet, rigid school, and then the second one was more focused on folklore?

JA: Folklore, mhm.

LR: And...had you like experienced or come in contact with that Haitian folklore dance before you were in that school?

JA: I'm pretty much exposed to Haitian folklore dance through Voodoo temples that were around my neighborhood. But I was very afraid of them. Because most of the time they really play at night when they're having ceremonies, and I feel like they were like devil worshippers or something because that's the stigma that they gave about voodoo traditional – traditional work in Haiti. So to me I felt like I would never want to dance that. But when I left that school and I heard about Viviane Gauthier and I went there and I saw the way she teach those kids and the way she approached her, you know, philosophy, I thought like, well this is a woman that I would like to really, you know emulate, and this is a lady that I would like to really learn more about. And as soon as I started to work at her house she was like first thing I believe in is education, so if you're not trying to go to school you're not going to be able to be in my dance

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school because I really believe like each of you should be a professional or leader or something. So she was very adamant about what she wanted her dancers to be. So she kind of really pushed me forward. And after my father died in Haiti the first dance class that I went back to take was her class and she was telling me like you know, I know that you're devastated and I know that you're very broken but you can make this turn to a positive in your life, and she really engorged me, she lived to be 99 years old. She died three months ago, and she was very alert. You know, until she became very sick at her last you know, times, but she really kind of moved me a lot.

LR: And so she was at that second school – the folk lore school?

JA: Mhm.

LR: Okay

JA: She owned that second school

LR: Okay. And so, sort of backtracking to when you left Haiti – had your mother gone to Boston already at that point?

JA: Yes my mother left Haiti in 1987.

LR: Okay.

JA: So she was straight into Boston and she was working in Boston as a housekeeper at Mount Auburn Hospital. And, she kind of took care of us for a long time before we got here and when we got here also though she did three jobs. Mount Auburn Hospital, there's another nursing home she used to work, and another place she used to work – and she became a phlebotomist. She was taking blood now at Mount Auburn because she went back to school and took some, you know, exam, and they promote her to being a phlebotomist. So, which was also inspirational because my mother is a very strong woman. That's a woman with a lot of, you know dreams and a lot of passion for life, and I was very proud to see my mother going back to school, studying, and some time when I'm doing my homework she would tell me "oh, can you come and help me?" No even though, not helping her to really understand what she

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was doing, but pretty much like telling me “can you hold this for me and let me see if I can remember it” and all this stuff. So to me my mother was very inspirational also.

LR: When she moved to Boston first and you were still in Haiti, how did she keep in contact?

JA: Oh we were keeping in contact via cassette tapes. Because in Haiti we have a custom to just waiting in the mail to see like the envelope will come with money in it and also with those cassette tapes – and we just like talked over it and we send it back to her. And after that we starting to really be more developed with you know not cell phone yet, but phone in the house and we'd be calling her pretty much every day. And she was very nostalgic because she left three boys in Haiti plus her husband who was still alive when my mother left and all the family was there you know, so she was very nostalgic.

LR: And what was the process of your moving to live with your mother?

JA: A long process. It was like we waited for like almost two years to get there because the papers that she filled through the embassy was a long process and I think Haiti was getting into a lot of hardship with America at that time because they had an embargo on Haiti, they had put a lot of stress on Haiti at that time. So, to me when that day arrived, they called us to go to the embassy for the interview, it was overdue. And we left Haiti in 1981 – 1991, no 1993 sorry. So it was very – after my father died, yes, a year and a half, almost two years after my father died.

LR: And who, who were you with when you were sort of waiting to move to Boston?

JA: I was with my grandmother, and some uncles of mine who used to come and kind of look over us a little bit. But after that you know we were, I was pretty much grown. Because at the age of thirteen, twelve, I'm starting to be very independent you know doing pretty much chores in the house, collecting the money that my mother will send from Boston, buying goods to put in the house, and after that bringing the kids to school. I was pretty much after my father died, I pretty much become the father of the house and you know being mature enough to really be responsible over the money for the things that we needed for the house and after that until I came here to live with my mother and I was again the father of the house. Yeah, because my mother pretty much did not remarry or trying to date anybody because she felt like she had

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three boys to take care of and went to school here, I make sure that I go to work as soon as I came here, I was volunteering at Mount Auburn Hospital again. And I worked there for about three years before I moved to New York City. And I was studying here at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, that's where I finished my high school. After Cambridge Rindge and Latin I went to Harvard for one year on a scholarship for the Radcliffe dance program. After that I went straight to Alvin Ailey after Boston, after Alvin Ailey I went straight to Joffrey Ballet. And Joffrey Ballet I just went around the world dancing for a minute and my last job was the Lion King in Amsterdam, and the contract was little bit tough because there were no union for us to discuss our money and our pay. So I ended up leaving Amsterdam and coming back to New York and I decided from New York I said let me start going back to Boston, cause I was coming to Boston for 10 years straight every weekend to just teach my Haitian folklore class that I teach in Cambridge at the Dance Complex. So, to me I felt like maybe I should try to give a chance to Boston to come to create something because a lot of people were in my class was like Jean why don't you try to start a company why don't you start – so I was like okay, let me see what I can do and I – around 2005 I started a small project with people, in 2006 I really started thinking about like you know doing company work where I have like friends of mine pretty much I didn't even audition people that time. But people really wanted to do some stuff with me and we do, we did something around Northeastern, Wellesley College, Harvard, all, every place, we're like running around. In 2006 we started to do the company and it's been on standing. And now we've been auditioning dancers and I have Robinson from Haiti who came from Haiti that, you know was dancing with us for three months here and he will be going back to Haiti and hopefully keep on coming back here too. But it's just we have also a young man from South Africa but he moved to Boston and he's dancing with us. So we have a multicultural dance company pretty much you know, includes you know white folks with black folks spanning you know Asian, so a lot of the time I get asked “why do you have white folks in your stuff. Why do you have Asian?” Because you know, and I'm from Haiti. And to me I – I cannot deal with the ignorance because I feel like we are not only human beings but we are part of this earth. And as I can learn a new language in coming to a new country I feel like it's the same way that other race or other nation can come and learn my language in my way of life and try to really help me educate others because you know a lot of people from my country refused to dance traditional dance because they feel like this is voodoo. And a lot of foreigners who doesn't know pretty much about you know Haiti or about voodoo – all they know about it, they would like to really study more about it. They're very open to come and study with me. So to me I don't have any barrier about you know language or race or whatever it is because I feel

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like you know of course there is racism, you know, all over the world pretty much, but I feel like to me is my place to educate and to really help you know build community through the difficulties that there is so we can be moving on together.

LR: When did you start teaching the Haitian folklore class here?

JA: I first started to teach the Haitian folklore with a friend of mine who came from Haiti who started to teach here 1995 and after 1995, I went to New York 1996 and I was still teaching for him, in 1997 I stopped teaching for him and I started to do my own class in 1997, so from 1997 and on, I've been doing that class.

LR: And are there Haitian people here in the US who are interested in like learning the folklore dances?

JA: We have a lot, we have a lot of Haitians who left Haiti who used to dance folklore, who used to be part of a cultural movement, and we have also Haitian American who never been exposed to it who's very curious about their roots about, you know, where they come from, or what about, why people put all this stigma on Haitians. So I have a mix of people who come to this class. But you know, I wish we could have more of the Haitian youth in that class because I feel like the youth, their parents really kind of keep them away from their traditions and most of their parents are Protestant or Pentecostal or Baptist so they kind of really feel like "oh no no you should not be going to that" so, it's unfortunate because also it's a way of, to me it's a way of people continuing to practice their, you know, their ignorance about their own culture and they feel like you know they're not educated enough to understand what's going on with their own culture and they end up, you know telling their kids and their grandkids that you know you should not be you know be part of that.

LR: Why do you think there's such a strong stigma against the –

JA: Lack of education. Because you have ninety... ninety percent of the population in Haiti is poor. I can say, we used to have a middle class around the 1980's, 70's, but now in 1990's 2000's, we have the majority of the population is very poor and maybe five or eight percent of the population is super rich. So when you have this gap, this huge gap, or desperation and despair, of course you'll find a lot of people feel like you know that their own culture is not

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valuable because they don't see the benefit of it. But also too we have a big damage from a lot of churches, a lot of missionaries who go through Haiti and pastors who call themselves pastors in Haiti that you don't even know, they cannot even read themselves, and they just preaching the wrong thing. So the church really damaged a lot of part of Haiti when it comes to culture and tradition, but also do I think, to me if Haiti was just like Cuba having leaders who can really push education forward, I don't think it will still be in that predicament because I feel like not having knowledge and not having power to read and write make you really believe a lot of trash.

LR: And so for you dance has been a really big way of keeping that Haitian tradition going and educating other people too about that dance and that dance form and the tradition that comes with it. And are there other ways that you've seen Haitians try to like educate and like, lead?

JA: Haitians are very smart. We are very smart people. There are Haitians who here at the age of sixteen and they end up going back to school or never – they've never been in school before and they end up going back to school and getting master degrees and all the stuff so Haitians I think always I think want to teach people about their food, because they feel like food is a common thing that people feel like you know they can relate on – so they're always teaching people about their food otherwise they will bring food to friends that was not from Haiti so they can taste their you know, cuisine. So to me I feel like we are a population with charisma and a lot of, I don't know friendliness, but I wish that most of our Haitians in Haiti were educated enough and were given the chance to really develop their mental state more. Because I feel like we have young kids in Haiti who's entrepreneurs, who's doing so great, example again as you know Robinson was like you know start doing Zumba in Haiti which is you know very unusual because Haiti is very small but a lot of things that you could do, you end up doing them very small because the country doesn't give you that much of, you know, opening to really expose and develop yourself. So to me I feel like, I wish that we have leaders, Haitian leaders, who really understand about development, who understand about how a country can really grow through youth. Because the adult who's been around, they've been doing the same game of like, lying, taking money and pretending like they're opening this orphanage – because in Haiti every corner you pass it's like orphanages, it's like McDonalds in the United States. So to me I feel like Haiti doesn't need no more orphanages because those kids really have parents who are adequate of you know taking care of them because the country doesn't give them the chance. It's not because they want to give their kids away to an orphanage, it's

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just they don't have the money they don't have the means to take care of their kids. So for me I feel like it's about time in 2018 to see those kind of movements stop, of like, you know making people feel limited, making people feel like they are not capable to really taking care of themselves or, and also their family. So, it's about time that people, I don't know, start thinking and start developing Haiti for the best. Or for the better.

LR: And who are the students that you teach at your institute – your dance institute?

JA: At the dance institute, I teach a variety of kids. The majority of my kids are very poor kids who walk sometimes three to four hours to come to our program and we have maybe one percent of kids who's not well-off, but of course some of them are well-off or some of them are able to come and drive and come to the program. So it's just the beauty to see the way when they get together the way they kind of can to heal together and the way they curious to learn, the way they really eager to do more, and some of them after many years of doing that some of them even open their own little spot where they can teach yoga or they can teach dance or they can teach other things. Even though they're not really well aware of the training yet but they still kind of trying to help others. So to me that's a powerful, powerful thing to see when you finish just teaching for like a month or two, and for that young kid to just trying to build bigger things in the around the committee even though they don't have nothing, you know. So, to me I feel like you know that's what gives me hope to keep on moving.

LR: Is it the same group every year, or do you see different people?

JA: No, every year we have a majority, I think if we have 75 kids most of the time, so I try to really get 40 new kids and the rest will be you know, usual kids who come around throughout the year. So I try to give a chance or continue to give a chance. And after that we take 5 percent of kids that was very dedicated, that will always come back that we try to keep them as, you know, kids that we want to see grow, so.

LR: What's some of the like change or growth that you've seen since you've started it?

JA: A lot. Positively a lot because mentally a lot of those kids have been in the same stories that I've been in Haiti, just like seeing gun violence to see a lot of craziness happening around Haiti, kidnapping and all this stuff. And some of them even get raped. So, to me to see those

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kids still moving and still thinking to do better things with their life, that's powerful and through the program we tried to encourage them, we tried to pay schools for some of them maybe for a year and we try to do a lot. It's just, it's unfortunate that we don't have leaders, Haitian leaders who can really say you guys are doing something powerful. Let us stand up with you and make this bigger. But it's just like they feel like we are an obstacle because we are coming and really open the eyes of young kids and open the eyes of communities to really make them live a better life. So, to me I don't understand that, you know that process from people who call themselves intellectuals and they end up really feel like you know what we're doing is a disadvantage to the country. Some of them, not all of them. So I just, to me that is why I really do not want to stand with politics, because I feel like politics in Haiti never bring us anywhere. And I lost money through it, by getting involved in performing and you know political affairs in Haiti, I end up getting very injured from that. So I don't want to mix my kids or my program with any political – governmental or political groups because you know I just want to make sure that I help them develop the way they're supposed to develop – freely, independently, and very smart also too. So, I'm trying to keep them moving until we can do more.

LR: How do you imagine that change happening for like better leaders to come in.

JA: I think it's been time for that a lot of Haitians get tired of like the same way and the same craziness happening. I think it's time. I think a lot of people really want to see better. And we have a president, I can tell you this president that we have in Haiti now – I don't even know him. I met him maybe once or twice because I went to a ceremony that he was there and I think I've met him another place – to me, he's somebody from the countryside and he's somebody who I've seen doing work because a passport in Haiti, to get a passport in Haiti sometimes it used to take you six months. Now it might take you maybe a week or two if you have your money ready and if you have people who can really help you get them done. So it's something that I've never seen in Haiti but to him that's starting to really happen. So, that's the first step. There is a lot – there are a lot of other things from the countryside roads, that used to be very crazy to get on the countryside, and now a lot of roads are being done. So, he's a young man also to have done a lot of great things around Haiti. It's just the old timers who's been around who control power because even though you have a president in Haiti, but there – are there a society of so-called bourgeois who really own every businesses in Haiti who own every right in Haiti and most of them are not even Haitians. Most of them are from Syria, are from other countries. They go in Haiti and they've been there for maybe decades and decades.

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Their parents gave birth to them in Haiti otherwise gave birth to them somewhere else and they came and migrated to Haiti and they really hold power in Haiti. So these are people who really manage the way Haiti works. So, for a president like a young man like Jovenel Moïse, that's his name, I think he really is brave enough to try to do everything that he's been doing and I commend him for that. But I hope those old timers are starting to really take notice and try to do better because their kids, most of their kids are in other countries – become lawyers, doctors, pilots – why not the pool, why not, you know, the regular kids from, you know, from the slums can just grow up and take care of their family. Why there have to be, you know, a history of depression you know to this you know and we don't even have a system to really help those families because we do not have a system of welfare in Haiti. If you do not have a friend or family member who's overseas in Europe or in America to send you some money you pretty much sitting down and dying of, you know famine, malnutrition, or depression, you know. So to me I think it's not the way that we should treat people. I don't think it's that way. If you're really calling yourself bourgeois or government people and you want to be rich you have to be able to balance your mind and just understand – yes, I want to get this for myself but there are other people also too that I should give opportunities to. Not giving them money. Not trying to you know give them freebies – to me I feel like Haitians are very smart. You have young Haitians that was producing small, you know, project like cars and houses and stuff at a young age and to see them really doing so well and to see this still happening like that to me it's very, it's very crazy...it's very crazy.

LR: Do you think other Haitians who are abroad, not in Haiti, share similar opinions?

JA: A lot, very a lot. And you have Haitians around the world who is doing great stuff but they refuse to go to Haiti because they are so afraid of going back to Haiti and get murdered or feel like you know that they discouraged because they feel like there is not a sense of normalcy in Haiti. So they have – I've been in Haiti many times, every year, I go and still like you will speak with somebody, a dignitary who's supposed to be like in charge of certain things and they'll never be able to give you the concrete answer or never really be able to give you the concrete help that you need. So, what they are missing Haitians is doing great stuff all over the world but they just feel like they get tired of their country, to see a country going down for the past 40 years. It is damaging to the mind of everybody who's living in it.

LR: Did you always know that you wanted to go back and give back with –

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JA: Since I was three years old.

LR: Yeah

JA: Since I was three years old I wanted to do something for my country. And I wanted to do things to – like teaching and all this stuff – that's what I really wanted to do.

LR: Do you know what sparked that in you?

JA: Hmm – teacher of mine, yes. I have a lot of mentors and teachers who really – I loved the way they teach and I really always want to teach others. And because I feel like teachers it's not something that you become like this (snaps) it's something that – I don't know... it's like a gift. And to me I'm glad that I find that gift – I discover that even though I was teaching at a young age I really discovered that I had that gift maybe around 2007, 2008 even though I was teaching many places, many schools, I always felt like – oh, maybe it's not really... But around the years that I've been traveling and seen the way other teachers that I'm passionate about, teach – I have Mr. Alvin Ailey also too who died many years ago. The way he'd speak the way he'd teach... There is a guy named Ulysses Dove, there is Viviane Gauthier, there is another woman, Haitian woman who used to dance with Martha Graham named Amy Andepatin [sic] who just died at 99 years old too – all these people really kind of they are great teachers. Even, last year before Amy Adenpatin [sic] died to see her teaching my kids in Haiti at ninety-nine years old, she's telling them to roll down and to see the process – to me it just moved me because I'm like – this is really, you know, these are people who really know how to do it. And so to me, I try to be, you know a voice and trying to be a guide to young people and give them hope because that's the only thing I can give them. And also give them openings on to where they can create their own.

LR: What was the first thing that you taught? Was it dance or...something else

JA: First thing that I taught was dance. Yup. And I think I was ... maybe 11. Because we used to have little groups around, neighborhoods in Haiti when we go to any empty spot and we just put the boom box and we start doing movement. And I was the only boy (laughs) there too, but we were like, very stupid because the place was too – very dry and there was nothing to

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protect our knees and we would go down and trying to do movement that was crazy and we used to go and compete with other groups in other neighborhoods. Sometimes when I go to Haiti and seeing that place that I used to dance at, to see the place still look the same and see like oh my God, that maybe I was too crazy to try and to do that. But in a way I feel like that inspired me to, I don't know, to continue doing what I'm doing now because I remember all these times that the way – all of the time I go perform with my friends and I was the only boy, and they'll be screaming slurs at me and they'll be like making fun of me but that never faded. I was like OK I'm finished shaking it up and we got the first place and sometime with no money, they, sometime they don't give – what did they used to give us? They don't give us no money. Sometime they might give us, you know those little decorations they put on those tables at home – they might just give us as a trophy like this is what we give you – a glass, like that

LR: Yeah

JA: oh that you won this, and we're like, going home and the next day we don't even know where the glass went because somebody already stole it. So to me it was fun and it was great. But when I was teaching my fellow friends I never knew that that was teaching them something. I thought I was just creating movement and they were just sharing time together so, I didn't even think of it as teaching.

LR: And when you moved from Haiti to Boston, were you able to dance during that time –

JA: Oh yeah

LR: - like when you first moved here and started to...

JA: As soon as I walked in.

LR: Okay (laughs)

JA: And I slept in the house across of the dance complex, I think Bishop Allen Drive. But I didn't know the Dance Complex was a dance school. I'm like oh my god that's a beautiful building I thought it was a place where people live. And I'm sitting at home around like the evening and I heard drums and I'm like (looks around) so I went out in the street and I look at

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that place and my mother the next day my mother walked by with me, my mother said If you go into that building I'll just kick you out. I'm going to send you back to Haiti. I'm like, okay, so I went to the Dance Complex the next day and I saw different type of dance from African dance to ballet to jazz – because at that time, Boston was very booming with dance. You have people coming from all over the world coming to teach there. And I saw everybody dancing and I'm like... how much is the classes and then they were like, because I'm too young, they said you can come for free. So I just put my dance clothes on and I just start dancing there. But my mother didn't know because she thought like, I was just like, you know maybe another place. And a teacher of mine, a Haitian American teacher of mine named Patrick Sylvain came to the house to talk to my mother about me dancing. She was very not happy about it but she kind of gave me a chance to express, and I ended up doing the first big show at MIT with a lady named Malanie Silva [sic] from Brazil, who came here to do a residency in Boston maybe for a year, and I was one of his dancers and I end up dancing a huge major part in the show and everybody was (claps) giving standing ovation and my mother was like ... maybe I'll let you dance. So, since after that I get freed and two years later I move to New York to study with the Alvin Ailey and I stayed in New York for 16 years.

LR: Do you remember what the first dance class was?

JA: In here... I think it was an African class with a guy named Ino. He used to teach with two sticks, and he's beating the sticks, and they were like hundreds of musicians in the class and there were like hundreds of people in the class. Like my classes now. And that guy just, will get you possessed. From just like you know you finish doing the movement and the way he come around and just like, trying to work with you, it was just amazing. He was an African-American from Washington D.C. I think, eho [sic] used to go to Africa a lot. And he was so influenced by the African movement and the African ways and he used to teach this huge class at the Dance Complex. And I don't know if he's still alive, but his name was Ino, Ino Washington [sic]. Mhm, yes.

LR: How long did you live across the street? From the Dance Complex

JA: Five years, four years? And after that, the house got burned and we moved, yeah the house caught on fire somehow I think, for some reason. Not huge fire but, after that we moved to Somerville, after Somerville we moved back in Cambridge somewhere, in Eastern or

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Western Ave or something like that. And after that my mother bought a house in Malden, 15 years ago.

LR: Yeah, what was the first house like?

JA: First house was in Cambridge was like... crazy because I'd never been in a place where there are so many people living in the same building because we used to have our own house in Haiti. So, and the house looked just alike, so I went out in the street, start walking and I start crying because I thought I got lost. I'm like oh my god, I don't know which door I'm gonna get in. And finally I saw my uncle was in front of the door was like - this is your house! I was standing in front of the house, I didn't even know. And also, I felt like the house was too weak. Because in Haiti all the houses are built with bricks. And I felt like my god if there's a fire I'm not gonna be able to run out there. It was a lot of anxiety. But I felt like it was a home it was an American home. And I'm like oh my God I wish it was going to be like huge and bigger. So all these things in my head. But to me it was a house, I could sleep in it but when it was winter I was like oh lord, please don't let me be here because it was hard, it was hard being in the winter here. And the summer was very hot also too in Boston. Because the first summer I got here the weather was so hot, people couldn't even go to the street because it was 98 degrees or 100 degrees. It was very humid. So to me I was like oh my god I don't like this because in Haiti it's pretty dry throughout the year and here it's like very hot in the summer and it's very cold in the winter so.

LR: And humid

JA: And humid. So I couldn't deal with it.

LR: Did you move with your brothers?

JA: My two brothers. Mhm, yes my two brothers. So pretty much I was in the airport by myself with them trying to navigate and trying to really speak English – that time I didn't, I didn't even hear English well, even though I was learning small English in Haiti. So I came here with my two brothers and we landed in New York by thank god my mother came all the way to New York to pick us up at the airport. So we traveled from, by car to come from New York to Boston and I was like (looks around) and I saw poor people in the street and I was like, completely

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shocked. Because I didn't know that you can have poor people in America. I didn't know that you can have trash in America. I didn't know you. I didn't know America was just like Haiti. So to me it was very shocking. And it was very eye opening also too, cause TV in Haiti showed you only the beauty part of America they never showed you anything – anything negative about America.

LR: And what did your brothers do when they came here?

JA: When they came here they were very happy to see my mother.

LR: Yeah

JA: And my little brother was younger, my mother left him in Haiti when he was six months old, he didn't even know that my mother was his mother because when he came he was three years old and I think it was like very strange to my mother. My mother was like happy to see all of us. She was devastated to see my father was not part of the trip. So she was very devastated about that.

LR: So when you first moved here what other places besides the Dance Complex did you go to or did you really love?

JA: I used to go to Jeannette Neill, it was a jazz modern studio. I used to go everywhere. Everywhere – I will be going to the south end, there was a dance teacher of mine, Calvin Wiley, who was amazing inspiration to me. And he was teaching aerobics but he was mostly also having a dance company where we all talented dancers from all over Boston are coming in and dance with him and it really kind of also helped me. To shape what my dream should be about dance. He moved to New York before me – so I used to go everywhere. Everywhere there were dance workshops and also at Cambridge Rindge and Latin too also was very helpful by bringing a lot of dance company members from Paul Taylor to Alvin Ailey to Martha Graham to the workshops because Celebrity Series used to bring all these companies in Boston but also to – bringing their company members to do workshops around the high school so, I'll been dancing everywhere – everywhere there is a company or everywhere there is a movement I will be there. Mhm, everywhere.

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LR: Did you make friends through dance?

JA: A lot of friends. A lot of friends but I have friends also who's not dancers. But who always love you know, me speaking to them, and I – they said that I had a funny accent and some of them were like oh my god you are so funny sometimes. So, I had made friends everywhere, but in dance yes, because I was always also on – focused on dance so much that I only you know had a lot of dancing friends only. And when I start traveling to New York and other places I mostly have my dances – my dance companions because I didn't have nobody pretty much around.

LR: And when you moved what was the biggest change that you faced?

JA: Biggest change, not hearing noise. Even though I was tired of the noise in Haiti. But when I came here and I – at night everything is so quiet, in the morning everything is so quiet. And I was like oh my god I – cause in Haiti everybody's waking up early in the morning to start screaming “oh, this is what I have for sale, you know anybody want to buy” but here you don't get that. My mother was like, no you have to go to the supermarket – I'm like *what?* I'm like, there's nobody selling things on the street? My mother was like no this is not Haiti. You might find certain places but not like this. If there is a fair, yes, if there's not a fair people go to supermarket. I'm like (looks shocked) so that was a big shock, not hearing the noise. So, and not really seeing people – like you live in the same building with a neighbor and not able to really go to that neighbor's house and really have like strong exchange. Because in Haiti, you know people live in your neighborhood, you are pretty much family to them, so sometimes they bring you food, sometime you go to their house – this is not only when there's a death or if there is a tragedy that you go to their house, you go to the house 24/7. People will be like will be running inside of different people's houses that you know, they just live in the neighborhood but we just become family, but – so to me that was a big shock.

LR: So here there wasn't that neighborhood community feeling.

JA: Not, at all, at all. It's still now – still now, it's even worse. Sometime in Malden where I live, the neighborhood where I live I look at the neighbors and I'm like, I cannot believe I say good morning and nobody's gonna answer me. I don't, cannot believe that somebody's not gonna be kind you know and just say hello. So, to me I'm like, yeah, so that's when I miss Haiti.

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LR: And, so now how would you describe your ties to Cambridge?

JA: Cambridge is my home because this is the second home that I – when I left Haiti this is the second home I came to. And also this is a place also I do a lot of my work. So I teach at the Dance Complex, I teach for many studios around Cambridge, I'm very involved in Cambridge at City Hall any time they're doing something Mayor Denise, Denise Simmons – will call me, I get involved in the Carnival here in Cambridge. Cambridge is pretty much the mecca, you know, of my world. So when I'm not traveling anywhere I rehearse with my dance company in Cambridge, I you know, I do so much in Cambridge.

LR: Was there something about Cambridge that drew you back even after you went to move to New York and you were traveling and working and dancing?

JA: I felt like Cambridge was a place, it was my home. So I felt like you know I could really go around and really connect with people that I need to connect to really do my work. So that's why I moved back to Cambridge. So...in a way it's like, made me feel like I'm in Haiti for a minute even though it's not the same as Haiti but I feel like you know, I really know Cambridge well enough. I'm trying to learn more about Cambridge but I feel like I know this place better and I, that's why I came and invest in it and also the place been grateful to me. Been kind to me also too.

LR: What communities in Cambridge have you considered yourself to be a part of since you moved here?

JA: Mmm, the Dance Complex, first – is that place that I feel like everybody knows me, through the Dance Complex, and everybody wants to meet with me, they come to the Dance Complex, and, yeah pretty much. But every other places I go, like the Cambridge Library, I used to go there to study a lot, I used to go there to study English to you know, read books, and to feel like you know, place where I can find therapy, so but the Dance Complex has been the center where everybody comes and meet me, meet with me.

LR: And so you have like, both other teachers at the Dance Complex and students, there are different types of people you're interacting with there.

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JA: Yes, Interacting, yes – and also I go to other collaborations around – Boston Foundation, NEFA, cause these people been supporting us also too through the dance company that I have. And the dance company's been doing a lot of workshops all around the neighborhoods in Cambridge. So we meet with a lot of – we go to Chinese neighborhood to do workshops, we go to Spanish neighbor- neighborhoods to do workshops, we go to African neighborhoods to do workshops so the dance company becomes also the mecca of my life. Because we're able to expose our work to the company and really do a lot of work with other, you know in collaboration with other institutions around Cambridge and Boston, to do the work that we're supposed to do. So, to me I feel like that you know that Dance Complex and my dance company in my company are the two major places that people come and meet with me.

LR: And you sort of mentioned this, but what are the other communities that you've engaged with in your work, in like the workshops.

JA: Everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. And I'm just hoping next year to be able to go to Cuba because I went to Cuba one time to do a workshop in Santiago, Cuba. So I'm hoping next year we can go to Havana and go back to Santiago, going to – you know, I would like to go to India, I would like to go to Japan, I would like to go to Africa, I would like to go everywhere even though I'm afraid of being on a plane now, but I – I'd like to go everywhere to see how we can do exchange, how we can do workshops, how we can do collaborations, cause I feel like the world needs to be more unified, and I feel like the work that we do helps a lot to do that. So, so I'm trying to do more with different communities. But we go to Haiti every year. We go – we stay in Boston, we travel to different states around the United States and we are hoping to do more international traveling soon so, it's not only we want to travel for the sake of traveling, we just would really like to do a lot of our work every place we can.

LR: Who do you travel with?

JA: I travel sometimes with some of my dancers, but most of the time I travel by myself. But I travel most of – a lot of the time with my dancers, and my musicians also too.

LR: And are these people that you've met around Cambridge and Boston, or everywhere?

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JA: Mostly around Cambridge at the Dance Complex that I met these people. And they become very, like my brothers and sisters.

LR: And when you do you teach the workshops and you go and do exchange and classes, what do you focus on?

JA: I focus on first on breathing. Warming up and breathing and really find the tune of how we are trying to be connected, not in the same level I think we all are on the same level in this world. Because sometime people – when people say “I’m not on the same level” – it’s a way of trying to diminish others, but to me when I’m trying to look for connection, a way of...wave – what kind of wave we are in and what kind of breathing length are we in, and if we can really find that therapy together. Because to me everything that I do now it’s – it’s about therapy, it’s about finding a way to breathe. Finding a way to understand each other. Finding a way to heal with each other. Cause I think each of us dealing with, you know our challenges and demons and suffering. And, we just cry differently but, but overall we are one and connecting with others is important in the work that I do also too I feel like it's important to really breathe together first, and after that we might move, sometimes people might feel like “oh, I’m so shy” because there was a girl yesterday was taking a class from me at a high school – at my old high school – I was teaching a masterclass, and she was completely shy. She put her hands under her clothes and she's so reserved and – but she still tried. She still tried to do one movement or two movements and at the end of the class I gave her a huge compliment because she had you know really the perfect facilities to really become a dancer. And I told her you know even though you don't know the movements well, you should not feel shy because you have the perfect body pretty much for that and you have a beautiful face so you should smile and relax – and she smiled and she said she will try so, so to me that's, you know, that's a connection that was very meaningful to me.

LR: And what projects are you working on now?

JA: Oh too many.

LR: (laughs) Yeah.

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JA: I'm working on my own project for – my show is gonna be from April 11 through April 14. We have five shows at the Roberts Theater through the Calderwood theater. There's another theater behind of it who's named the Roberts and I'm working for project for Harvard University and Harvard University for like one young woman who find grant, because she goes to Harvard she's taking a Masters, so they gave her a grant to do a show called Vanity Lane. I'm producing, I'm not choreographing sorry, The Wiz at the Lyric stage. I am...working with different young groups around Boston in Hyde Park. I work... oh, that's too many things, I'm working also on my teen intensive because we do a teen intensive program here in Boston during spring break for teen from age of 13 to 19. I am gonna be collaborating with the children's museum, they will always give us their space to present those kid- those kids. I am working – on too many other things. Too many other things, but I'm working on a lot of projects.

LR: And what's the biggest way that you feel dance has really helped you stay connected with Haiti and heritage and how you've like, how you can get that across to others when maybe they're not Haitian and they're taking your class and they're interested in...

JA: I think dance helped me a lot of ways, and if I – if it wasn't for dance I will not be here talking to you. So, to me I always encourage other kids to give themselves a chance not only to dance but to really trying to learn, and experiment. Cause I think through experiment- you know, through experiments I end up really discovering that really this is my passion. This is what I want to do. So, to me I always tell them to just express themselves when they go to a class don't step on back on the back only and trying to cross their arms and trying to observe only. It's great to observe, if you really want to observe but you cannot just like, put your clothes on and say you're gonna dance and you're procrastinating, and if you're like "oh my god I'm gonna be (unclear)" No. You go and really tune yourself up and trying to do it. And after that you'll find that dance is very explorative and it's a thing that really brings a lot of understanding to your body and your brain. So I'm hoping that you know young kids can really stayed focused and stay passionate and try dance.

LR And, in the workshops, or like in the workshops that you've been doing more frequently here since you've been here and even your classes since the very beginning, have you noticed any changes in Cambridge or in the communities that you've been working with?

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JA: Um, yes a lot of changes. Cambridge was completely depressive for a minute. From 1995 up to 2008, or 2009. But I feel like Cambridge is starting to really revive again and I'm hoping that it can grow for the better not only – not only constructing big buildings to create more stores for us but really create cultural, you know, centers, really kind of like have residencies for dance companies or for artists, visual artists or, anything when it comes to culture, you know, that would be very great. Or any partnering they can create between other, you know traditional you know traditional works, that we could do in Bost- in Cambridge. So to me I feel like of course Cambridge is developing in a way for housing, but the same way I think it should be developing for cultural more – you know, so too for more opportunities for artists because I feel like artists are always trying to survive here in Cambridge and also mostly Boston too. I feel like it's about time to really invest in those talented artists who deserve to be supported and to really see how we can really keep these artists here in our city so they don't have to go right here in New York or trying to take a plane to another country or to another state. So for me that's, that's my only hope. And, and I hope for better growth because I feel like it's, it's time for us to grow and to be able to help the next generation to, to get better.

LR: (pause) And, how, with your connection with Haiti, how do you maintain connections to family that are still in Haiti?

JA: Um, WhatsApp, Facebook, Western Union, the class that I teach in Haiti, and I travel to Haiti three to four times a year. Now I have a child now so I don't travel too much like this for no reason, but you know it's just – I will continue to con-you know, to stay connected to Haiti. But I think I've been also exploring the thought of maybe going to move to Cuba if Haiti is not working after five years maybe move to Cuba and just really do the project that I do you know in Cuba. And still come to Boston and do a lot of work because I feel like you know sometimes you know as an artist you can just get tired very easily – of your own space, where the space become very dysfunctional. So I'm hoping that you know the dysfunction of Haiti stops very soon so artists, young artists like myself or even younger to be able to go back to really develop this country because this country is like in the urge of you know for this kind of movement. So that's pretty much what I'm thinking about.

LR: And back in Cambridge, how would you describe the Haitian community here or the Caribbean community here in Cambridge.

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JA: Ok, now let's not let me get too real (laughs) the Caribbean community here – it's amazing. Beautiful people, mix of like beautiful Trinidadian, Haitian, Jamaican, Guyanese, a lot of beautiful people. But I feel like it's only for Carnival that they finally get together. To say and show their craft. But after the carnival is over you don't see them pretty much into anything. So of course you see them in dance class. But to me I feel like with the, you know, when you are a community or when you are a population of a race as black folks, we need to, I think do more when it comes – not only do more to stay connected, but do more also to of investing in our youth. Because I feel like a lot of parents just feel like “OK, my kids are dancing with Jean Appolon or dancing with you know, Urbanity, or dancing with Boston Ballet when most of the time also too you don't see those parents to be more proactive in trying to find out what they can do because we need parents, we need parents to be part of the community that we're building. We need parents to be part of the committee that we're building you know when it comes to having like a meeting about what we need next. So you know a lot of the time the parents feel like when they have their kids coming to us they're like, you know drop them at the babysitting office and they just move on to get their project done. So to me I feel like the Caribbean community here, they are beautiful. And they are strong people and they capable to do a lot. But I feel we do not communicate with each other enough to really stay stronger with each other and be able to really change our surrounding but also be able to change our home. Because I feel like if we are staying connected and we're trying to be you know, more real to what's going on in life – because a lot of the time our country, the reason why it's still not good is because there's a politics behind it to keep us away from it. So, to me I feel like if we were you know, more in tune of engaging of what we really need to see happen around the community here and also at home, I think it will make it better, it will make things better.

LR: Are there any other community, like events or spaces than Carnival that like, give you guys the opportunity...that's the main –

JA: At all.

LR: Yeah.

LR: At all, except the City Hall, like I said, and also the city of Boston sometimes we have small grants to really do projects there. So, to me I feel like it should not fall only on the back of City Halls and Mayors Office to do things for us, we need to have – because there's a lot of

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prominent Caribbean people here, Haitians, as you know, Jamaican, as any other Caribbean leaders who really have their own business, they build so many things and they have enough resources to really invest in different projects that we're doing here in Boston including Cambridge.

LR: And what happens around, like in the preparation for Carnival and, and what do you notice happening in the community?

JA: I notice that a lot of rehearsals happening. All those group to start shaking it. I see also too for their costumes to get ready. They meet a lot with each other and they really plan things and they create beautiful things. But after the Carnival is over, they're done.

LR: Yeah.

JA: They're done. You don't even see them in the street too much. Or if they're not having a fair, for them to come and just, you know get together again, you don't see them. You know, a few meetings that I go and see that you see them, some of them there not all of them. Some of them there but to me I feel like the same way we plan for the Carnival and we make it so huge – let's try to continue to develop things and make things better, for kids who's coming up.

LR: What community partners work together for Carnival?

JA: Hmm, Jamaican, we have Natalie – I forgot Natalie last name that she used to also be in dance company with me when I was younger, and she pretty much was the head person who kind of, you know, meet with other people and other communities to develop what the Carnival's gonna be. We have, oh so many people that I forgot their names. I'm so sorry if they're listening to this track. So that they really get together and just talk about it and just try to develop how they want the Carnival to be. So, to me I feel like you know, there are so many, there are so many but I feel it could be, it could be better and I just hope that, you know, that we don't think small anymore or we don't think in a box too much anymore, we just develop things to make things better and bigger.

LR: Okay, and I have a few questions related to the project in general. So first, is there anyone you recommend I should talk to about Caribbean heritage and history in Cambridge?

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JA: There are so many people – there's Jean Dany Joachim who's a poet, who also work on collaboration with me. He's at Bunker Hill Community College. I can give you his number also too.

LR: I went to one of his City Night Readings recently.

JA: Yes, yes, there's a – there's so many people – there's members of my dance company even though some of them are not Haitian but they been to Haiti with me and they love you know, Haiti. There is France Delateur [sic] who used to be a – a writer for Boston Globe, a Haitian-American woman who also put together to create We the People – it's an organization like a, you know, resistant organization who kind of cater to young kids, to young kids of color to just help them understand their stories and also trying to do protests around a lot of things. So. There's so many people. So many other people that I have.

LR: And what would you like to see as an end result of an oral history project? What do you think would be –

JA: End result will definitely, I think that's what you guys are doing, trying to really educate people in the community and – but I would like for it to be exposed in every library and, on Boston and Cambridge, that people can have access to, and also, I don't know, be able to even connect that story to another, maybe Puerto Rican story, to like a Irish story or Jamaican story or another Dominican story, to really kind of like, have to see how similar that we are, in how we just view our communities here, and also how we miss home and what the similarities that we have together.

LR: Yeah. Okay, well, thank you so much for taking part.

JA: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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