

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Sista II Sista
Interviewer: Nadine Naber**

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Sista II Sista is a Brooklyn-wide, community-based organization located in Bushwick, New York. It is a collective of working class young and adult Black and Latino women building together to model a society based on liberation and love. The organization is dedicated to working with young women of color to develop personal, spiritual and collective power. Sista II Sista is committed to fighting for justice and creating alternatives to the systems we live in by making social, cultural and political change. Sista II Sista's involved in a variety of projects. Three examples of their work include: The Freedom School for Young Women of Color, The Big Mouth Project which is a series of workshops and talks on violence against women, ageism, sexism, sexual harassment, peer pressure and understanding multiple expressions of oppression and privilege. Another project is Sista Liberated Ground, a community action project to fight violence against women of color in their community without relying on the police.

Nadine Naber is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Women's Studies and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Anthropology. She received her Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Davis. Her research and teaching focus on Arab American Studies; Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms; Race and Ethnicity; and Colonialism and Post-Colonial Theory. She is currently writing a book entitled, *De-Orientalizing Diaspora: Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity among Arab American Youth in San Francisco, California*. She is conducting new research on the ways that class, gender, sexuality, and religion have intersected within Arab American engagements with anti-Arab racism following September 11th. Nadine is a co-editor, with Rabab Abdulhadi and Evelyn Alsultany, of *Gender, Nation, and Belonging*, a special issue of the MIT On Line Journal of Middle East Studies on Arab American Feminisms. She is co-editing a forthcoming book with Amaney Jamal entitled *From Invisible Citizen to Visible Subject: Arab American Engagements with Race before and after September 11th*. She has published articles that situate Arab American Studies in the context of U.S. racial and ethnic studies, and women of color feminisms in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *the Journal of Ethnic Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. She is co-founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, North America (cyber AWSA); Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ) and Arab Women's Activist Network (AWAN) and a former board member of Incite! Women of Color against Violence; Racial Justice 9-11; and the Women of Color Resource Center.

Transcript of Sista II Sista

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes¹*

Nadine Naber: We're here today with Verónica Giménez and Loira Limbal. Welcome to Michigan and thanks for joining the Global Feminisms Project and coming out here today to tell us about Sista II Sista and the grassroots organizing work you do. Welcome Verónica.

Verónica Giménez: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Nadine: And welcome Loira.

Loira Limbal: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Nadine: It's great to be here with you today. Let me begin by telling you what we'll be talking about during the interview. First we're...I'll ask you some questions about your personal histories and then we'll talk about Sista II Sista as an organization, and some of the work you do with Sista II Sista. How does that sound?

Verónica : Sounds great.

Nadine: So when we were talking yesterday, it was interesting to hear about how the members of Sista II Sista come from such diverse backgrounds. So maybe we can start by hearing about your own backgrounds, your personal histories, and, you know, where you were born, where you grew up, and...and then you can take it from there.

Verónica : Okay. Um, I was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and my family actually comes from Argentina. They migrated to Caracas way before I was born, and then they migrated to New York, all in search of a better life, all in search of trying to find some economic and political stability for their life. Um, and so my experience moving to New York at the age of seven was basically I...well, I really came to politicization right away in terms of looking at...comparing the United States to Venezuela and being really let down, being really upset, being really angry at my parents for being...for having brought us, not understanding why my father would have left us to live in the United States for more than a year prior to us joining him. And, and really I just remember being really angry and watching TV and then going to my mom and crying in her lap and asking why...what are we doing here? And I think it was more about the developmental age that I was at where I started really looking at, people are being shot every day, I don't remember this in Venezuela, and it was just, I was younger and I didn't see that...

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

Loira: Yeah.

Verónica : ...on TV or whatever. Plus, also the coldness of New York in terms of the culture, and even though there's tons of different people, I just wasn't really relating to anybody except new immigrants that lived on the block who were my age or something. And then in terms of racial understanding, my racial consciousness, I think my family, it was a big difference for me when my family moved from where a community full of new immigrants, um, from all around the world to then my family's bought a like crack house² old home that was sold by the...by the government. That was like through this place where it was Richmond Hill, New York, a community of mostly Guyanese and Caribbean-born immigrants but for a second generation already. And where I had to be located to go to school, I had to be bused to a white area called Howard Beach. And it was about two years after they had a very dramatic episode in Howard Beach where mostly third generation Italians who were living in America who considered themselves Italian American full blood had chased down this young African-American male, down a highway and he got run over, and it was all this thing surrounding racism and getting blacks out of their neighborhood basically. And when...so my racial consciousness really became blown when I was not willing to be accepted under the Italian...

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : ...like auspice. They were willing to say, well, since my father's last name has an Italian descendency, they were like, well, you're Italian too. And I was like "No, I'm not, I'm not Italian, I'm not Italian American, and I related more to being Venezolana and bringing up my identity that way. And then when I went to high school, there was...it was just real easy. I had a lot of trouble with my parents and I had to look...I chose to go to a high school far away, so I went to a high school in Brooklyn, in Flatbush, Brooklyn where it was real clear the dichotomy—either you were down with the rich, white Jews that lived in the upper scale part of Flatbush, or you lived with...or you were down with the Latinos and Blacks who were...who lived in what's known as Flatbush—more of like the low... low community....lower class, working class community. And so that's where really I started identifying more to African American community and participating within the African American Union that they had there, and also the Latinos Unidos group that they had there.

Nadine: So what about college? Did you go to college?

Verónica : Yeah, I did go to college. Um, I didn't want...I was afraid of leaving New York. I had heard horror tales of what happens outside of New York in the United States. So I purposely looked for a school within New York City's boundaries, and I went to the New School for Social Research. It was a private school. It didn't look like I was going to get to go up until the week before class started because of financial aid problems. Um, and when I did end up going, it was a shock in terms of realizing that they were really selling and promoting diversity, and "new curriculum" like touchy-feely, race-class-gender curriculum. But when you really brought in your own hardcore experiences, there

² House where crack-cocaine users do drugs.

was conflict in the classroom. So it was okay to talk about it in theory but when you were talking about what really happens, just coming...the difference in terms of coming into Manhattan from living in, in Jamaica-Queens, Richmond Hill area . . .

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : . . . then you have, there was a real problem. And then there...then it was real obvious that they had a rotating door policy with all staff of color, which became my mentors, which became my models there. And then...so by the third year, I was totally disillusioned when they didn't rehire my mentor, Jackie Alexander and that was about it. And it was actually around the third year when I had...my connections to Sista II Sista came around my third year when I had a white professor tell me you should think about teaching at El Fuente, because I wanted to be a teacher, a dance teacher. And I went to a school called El Fuente Academy for Social Peace and Justice, and...and that's where I met Ajua and I met Jenny, two of like the original co-founders, or whatever. Um, but two members who were members at Sista II Sista, and started talking about Sista II Sista, and asked me to perform at one of our nat—or our annual fundraisers, and that's how I got introduced to Sista II Sista.

Nadine: All right. Thanks.

Verónica : Yeah.

Nadine: And what about for you, Loira? Can you tell us...?

Loira: I have to do all that too? [laughter] Oh, boy. Well, I was born in Puerto Rico, both of my parents are from the Dominican Republic. And I came to New York when I was about three years old with my mother and my aunt, and we moved, we first came to the South Bronx, then from the South Bronx we moved to Harlem. And from Harlem we moved to Washington Heights, back to Harlem, back to the South Bronx. I really have lived like uptown. You know, I'm like an uptown New York girl [laughter], through and through. And I think, you know, in terms of just, you know, becoming involved in community work and social justice work, I think pretty similar to Verónica, it was through the experience that I...the different experiences that I went through. My mother didn't speak English and so a lot of times I would have to translate for her in all kinds of circumstances, and I remember one time I went to the unemployment office with her, and, you know, just seeing how impatient people were with like the fact that like, you know, they had to talk to this immigrant woman who doesn't speak English, and, "oh, I really have to end up talking to like a seven-year-old, you know, eight-year-old kid" and just being really impatient with that, and I felt like, really treating her like she was just dumb, you know, like being disrespectful to her. Which for me was hard to see because, you know, I really looked up to my mom, like I was a little kid, you look up to your moms. You don't really want to see people talking down to your mother, you know. Lot of those types of experiences, you know. First time I got called a nigger, you know, on the street, Midtown Manhattan, you know, like New York is supposed to be whatever, you know.

Verónica : The melting pot.

Loira: Yeah. There's everybody and everything and, you know, I'm walking down, it was like on 50 something street, and, um, it was raining. This, um, short, Jewish man had a big, big umbrella, and...and we were walking, and like he walked past, past me and almost hit me with his umbrella. I have to duck, but somehow, for some reason, he was upset at me or something, you know, and just like stopped and was like, "Nigger!" you know, and just kind of like was really ill about it, you know, and I was young. I remember kind of like standing there and being like, "what just...what just happened?", you know, like, it was like a normal day, I was doing normal things. I didn't...I couldn't...I didn't have a come back or anything, you know, because I was just kind of like...you know.

Verónica : Thrown for a loop.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: You know, and just like a bunch of different experiences that...And I remember seeing the *Eyes on the Prize* series³ also when I was really young and like seeing all those images, you know, all Black folk being like beat and hosed down and everything like...Just a lot of stuff made me altogether with my experience, and you just start questioning things that I saw around me. I remember my uncle had just come from the Dominican Republic and I guess somebody had done something in our neighborhood, and they were look...they were looking for a tall, Black dude, right? And my uncle fit that description. He was a tall Black dude, you know. And I was coming home from school. Mad⁴ people are around, the cops...cops have my uncle like up against the wall, you know, on this like fence. His face is like all pressed up into the...to the bars of the fence and everything and then all this commotion. And they're looking for this person and the description like when you look, when you really looked at the description, it didn't have anything to do with my uncle. My uncle had just gotten here, didn't speak English, nothing, you know. It was just like "Welcome to America," you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

³ *Eyes on the Prize* is a 14-part series chronicling the U.S. Civil Rights movement. The series first aired by on Public Broadcasting Service in the late 1980s . The series dealt with such landmark events as the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott of 1955-56, the 1963 March on Washington, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, but also documented the workings of the movement on a grassroots level, presenting events and individuals often overlooked. Produced by Blackside, Inc., one of the oldest minority-owned film and television production companies in the country, the series received over 23 awards, including two Emmys.

⁴ Used in this way "mad" means "many" or "crazy amounts of." This is not the same as the British English usage of "mad" as simply meaning "crazy" or "insane," nor does it mean "angry".

Loira: It was his like welcoming wagon⁵ or whatever. And just all those things, seeing all those kinds of injustices, which at the time I didn't see as injustice, but I just saw it as like not good, not right. Why, why, why...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...does it have to be like this? Why are all the buildings in my neighborhood burnt down, and when you go to downtown Manhattan it's like the sidewalks are huge and really clean and there's doormen and, you know, and all these kinds of like questions started coming up. And slowly but surely, you know, you kind of... somebody comes by and tells you something that sparks your interest, you know, at a certain point in your life, and you're like, oh, you know, let me go check that out. And so I began...like began being involved in community work through that kind of wanting to understand and wanting to talk to people that were talking about why things were the way that they were...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...in our neighborhoods and stuff, so...it's a little bit of my...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...history stuff.

Nadine: Thanks. So...so in a way you answered the question about what brought you into organizing. So maybe we can shift to a discussion about Sista II Sista. It was beautiful last night when Verónica was talking about how...she talked about Sista II Sista as her heart and soul. So maybe I can ask you to go into some of what is Sista II Sista. Let's start there.

Verónica : Well, Sista II Sista, um...well, let's...I'm going to share a little bit about the history of Sista II Sista. Um, Sista II Sista basically came around, came together in 1996 when a circle of women really started discussing the reality that there was no real space for young women of color in particular. If you went to a community organization or a cultural organization, then youth organizing wasn't really a topic, wasn't something central, wasn't something to be discussed. If you went to a youth organization, then women's issues wasn't, wasn't central, didn't even fit in the scope of their discussion. And if you went to a woman's organization, youth was last.

Loira: Women of color, working class...

⁵ The *Welcome Wagon* was founded in 1928 to greet new homeowners and familiarize them with their new communities. Originally, "hostesses"—women who were friendly and knowledgeable about their neighborhood—would personally deliver baskets of gifts supplied by local businesses to new homeowners and tell them about local civic and cultural activities in the community. Today, the organization welcomes families to their new homes by providing them with the names and numbers of local businesses and services via mail or the internet. Welcome Wagon serves approximately 2 million families every year.

Verónica : Yeah. Yeah.

Loira: ...women of color wasn't at the center, so...'

Verónica : Yeah. So...So that's basically where Sista II Sista came to in terms...

Loira: And things...just to add, there was...um, a bunch of people were at a...a Black student leadership conference or something like that. I mean, in the...

Verónica : Out in the West somewhere.

Loira: I'm getting the title wrong. And they were sitting there and there was all these like workshops and panels and things talking about young Black and Latino men...

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: ...like the experience of young Black and Latino men in urban centers in the inner city, really talking about young men as like this kind of endangered species...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because there's lot of stuff coming at them and, you know, police brutality and all of these things, and gangs, and blah-blah-blah. And they were kind of like, yo, but there's like a whole lot of young Black and Latina women like there's nobody talking about. Like, what about their experiences? What about the things that they go through? You know, and from there coming back and being like, yo, there really isn't a space that's focused on us, you know...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...for us to be able to share our experiences and to kind of think of, you know, of like what we would like things to look like, what we would like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, how we would like things to be different and how we could do that, you know, and...So that was kind of like the...it's part of...it was partly a reaction, you know, to the lack of spaces, but also I think envisioned as a place where, you know, women could come together to collectively do things, you know, young women of color could collectively do things.

Nadine: And when was that early period?

Loira: It was '95-'96.

Nadine: '95-'96.

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: And so...so what happened then? I mean, how...how...how was it formed?

Verónica : Well, originally the group of women of color started discussing the need to have something, a space for the holistic development of young women, for young women and by young women. And so then originally what came out of that was the idea of having a program, an annual program that came together in the summer, and it was all by volunteer...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...effort and time. And that was the beginning of the Freedom School for Young Women of Color. It originated as like a summer event that, you know, people pulled together out of any and all resources they could, you know, catching a couple extra books from the high schools where they were teaching or bringing in some material, and just...and starting to start the discussion basing on the histories of radical women of color, getting revol—like that was one of the major topics, revolutionary women in history...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...of color. And so looking at that. And then it just sort of developed. I'm not sure when it was that we started the discussion of not reproducing some of the...the power dynamics that currently exist, because that, there was a shift...

Loira: Another organization.

Verónica : ...yeah, in our own organization.

Loira: The thing too about that was like we would...every summer it was done in like a different place, you know, because we would borrow space from people, so that one summer we used like a church space, one summer we used a school space, like other organizations' spaces. And, and I think too that whole idea with the Freedom School why, you know, it got named the Freedom School was in the tradition of the freedom schools that happened down South during the Civil Rights Movement⁶ and all that, you

⁶ At the height of the *Civil Rights movement* in the United States, leading civil rights groups organized the Freedom Summer of 1964, where thousands of volunteers traveled to the Deep South to fight the disenfranchisement of African Americans there. The effort was concentrated in Mississippi, where in 1962 only 6.7 per cent of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, the lowest percentage in the country. As part of the Freedom Summer, 30 Freedom Schools were established in towns throughout Mississippi. Volunteers taught in the schools and the curriculum now included black history and the philosophy of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1964 over 3,000 students attended these schools.

know, that time period of equated to political education work with people and then be able to take action with people. So, you know, just to, to kind of add that.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And at one point when it started it wasn't a collective, and like Verónica was saying, it was totally, you know, people volunteer. A few people were teachers at the time. Some other people were like just doing other things...

Verónica : Artists, independent, whatever.

Loira: ...um, and so the summer times...And I think it was like this setup of like there was like a core committee and then there were other folks, you know, who were like volunteers or something like that, and through a lot of discussion and a lot of like growing pains, because I know that process is really painful. I wasn't around for it then, but I hear the story that it was a painful process to go through because it involved like checking people on like their power tripping, and, you know, why does this have to be like this, and why does this have to be like that?, and some people left, some people stayed...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know. New people came in. And that's when the decision to become a collective really happened, and to be a collective that would function on a consensus base, you know. So really like trying to create something where everyone's voice was equally important, you know...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and equally...

Verónica : Valued.

Loira: ...valued, yeah. Because we had pr—you know, we had exactly come from a space of being other places and other spaces where our voices weren't valued...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because either we were young or because we were women or because we were young women of color altogether or whatever, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: So we were like we can't, we can't just keep doing that, you know, we can't just keep reproducing it. So that's where the whole collective...which for us is something that is really important and we talk about a lot because we see that in...you know, a lot of

times people are talking about...when they're talking about community organizing, they're talking about, you know, you have an issue that you're working on, right, and so you come up with a campaign and you have a victory and you don't have a victory, and it's kind of like really product-oriented.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Like "what's the end goal" type of thing. Even though the whole time that you're working, you know, there could be like, you know, mad issues and different dynamics that are oppressive and silencing to people but it doesn't matter so long as we get like the victory over there, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Whereas...

Verónica : Which is usually aimed at reform, right? Which is usually aimed at...

Loira: Of an institution...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...or something. Whereas for us, the process of how we work is really important. You know, like for us it's not going to be meaningful, you know, to say for example get 38 new translators in a welfare center and that be our victory if the whole way through, you know, all the women that don't speak English don't have equal say in the campaign, in the work, because they don't speak English and we don't care. You know what I'm saying?

Verónica : Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: Like...So for us it's really, you know, the whole collective thing is more than even a structural thing. It's...it's like what we're about, you know, what we believe in.

Nadine: Um-hum. So the collective is kind of a non-hierarchical group of people who run the organization?

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: I mean is it people from different age groups? Could you tell us more about the collective?

Verónica : Yeah. Well, the collective is...all are Sista II Sista is intergenerational. And the collective is also intergenerational. But we noticed because the collective ends up taking on most of the administrative hardcore like...

Loira: Boring work?

Verónica : ...the...yeah, the boring work, that it wasn't really attractive to all of our young...younger Sista members. Right. And also I'd like to say something that I meant to say earlier. Which is usually we wouldn't be here two adult members, collective members representing Sista II Sista. This is not...this is also a configuration that we're not very comfortable with because it's always been important for us to make sure that young women's voice is represented through her, like by her own speaking, you know, through her presence. And because of the...the dates in which our...

Loira: It's a Thursday and a Friday

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...you know, high school students are in high school. They're in school right now.

Verónica : Yeah, there's no way that they could miss two days. And so...

Nadine: And because the interview took place on a Thursday or Friday...

Verónica : And so far away...

Nadine: ...the younger girls couldn't come?

Verónica : Yeah. Exactly. And so I think there, if...if the questions were being thrown to a younger sister...

Nadine: Um-um.

Verónica : ...I'm sure they would be saying it, you know, answering it through their eyes. And so in that way...But to bring it back to the collective, once we started realizing that even though we were inviting and trying to schedule it around their schedules, the meetings that...two three-hour meetings once a month weren't interesting and fun and people weren't coming, then we had to...we had to really hold ourselves accountable to our saying we want everyone to be part of the decision-making process.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : And so that's where we discussed the idea of creating squads, which is another like...

Loira: Body.

Verónica : Yeah, it's another body of younger sisters coming together and participating within the program of our organization, within the structure, the, you know. And so that's basically...

Loira: And we have a board too.

Nadine: The board can't come here.

Verónica : Yeah. Which is an advisory board?

Loira: Yeah. They don't have like decision...

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: ... making... I mean, they have decision-making power but it's not usually like how most boards function or whatever. Um, and the squads, they really like kind of lead most of the programmatic work of the organization. So they've gone through...it's like normally young women that have gone through the Freedom School Program.

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: Um, have finished like a cycle of the Freedom School. Then go through training and then are like stipended⁷ to be able to be around, you know, Sista II Sista more, to be able to take on kind of, you know, facilitation of workshops and developing curriculum for other young women their ages, and to really be leading the community, organizing work, choosing the issues, thinking about the strategies and stuff like that. And the squads too, with the whole thing of being stipended was something that really, we had to really think about. Because one of the issues that's very real is that young women in our communities either have to work after school or have to take care of a younger sibling. So participation of young women in, you know, in something like this sometimes isn't valued by like family, you know, or just they just can't do it, you know, financially they can't do it or whatever. And so, you know, it's like a lot of things that...You know, I think in this conversation that we, I've had with...with some other folks, it's like, you know, women-only spaces and stuff for young women I think is really different than creating stuff for...just for young men, you know, young-men-only spaces. Because I feel like there's so much other...there's so much more pressure on young women to have a different kind of responsibility within their homes than there is for young men, you know, which kind of makes like, you know, that their participation that much harder, you know, and something that's outside of the home, you know. At least I feel that way in our communities, you know.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Nadine: Well, this is a perfect transition to go into some of the projects since you started talking about the programmatic. So maybe I can ask you to tell us a little bit about some of the projects that...that you're working on.

⁷ A *stipend* is a set pay or compensation for services, paid daily, monthly, or annually.

Verónica : Sure. Well, I can, I can discuss a little bit about our current organizing project...

Nadine: Okay.

Verónica : ...which is “Sista’s Liberated Ground.” And much like we...like Loira was mentioning about us...about it not being goal oriented strictly. It’s very much about the process. Just like the collective and the squads. If we need to...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...we need to create another function, like now it’s important for us to find...to better incorporate youth that are passing out of the squads and into the Collective or into more of the staff, so we’ve created a new youth staff position. With, with our SLG work, it’s also about the process. Where we think...like we’ve already addressed through a video “You Have the Right to Break the Silence,” and through two seasons’ amount of work, like the reality of police harassment, um, on young women of color, in particular within our own communities, we also realize that when there is domestic abuse or familial abuse, calling the police is not really going to solve our issues. And we don’t...and we don’t think that domestic abuse is a woman’s issue. You know, we think of it more as it affects everybody. If we were to call the police or...or if a sister is to be killed like one sister was fighting with her mother by a police officer, it affects the whole family, it affects the whole community, it reverberates throughout the block, throughout the neighborhood. And it affects all of our safety. And so we look as Sistas Liberated Ground as a community effort, as a community work. So what we’re trying to do is we’re trying to change the culture of violence that currently exists within ourselves, within interpersonal relationships, within our families and throughout the community. So the ways in which SLG is trying to affect that culture is by (1), doing cultural events, doing hardcore propaganda stating that violence will no longer be tolerated within a designated zone. Um, and (2), by promoting discussion. We’re having like what we call Sista Circles, which are more like forums for us to throw out issues and discuss it and try to hold one another accountable on if we say we’re not going to, you know, we’re not...we’re not tolerating violence then...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...what’s up with somebody just yelled at you. You just yelled at somebody back. What’s going on? You know, and you hit somebody...your little sister? Why? You know. Then we also have an action line which is a way for all community members and all interested people to find out how they can be involved. And, and we also have...what am I missing? Sista Circles, Action Line, propaganda, and...

Loira: There’s something else.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Destroy police. Oh-h-h...

Verónica : I'm blanking out, the light, no. [laughter]

Loira: Sista Circles.

Verónica : Workshops and trainings.

Loira: There we go.

Nadine: Right. [laughter] I see.

Verónica : How could we forget? [laughs] Workshops and training. Which is a space for us to practice, to practice how...self defense, personal self defense, collective self defense. A variety...yeah.

Loira: Whatever, you know, folks in the community identify. Like we had had a couple of community meetings with different women from the...the immediate area where we're at and, um, you know, people brought up like, you know, "We want a workshop on this, or we would want a workshop on that," or...

Verónica : Um-hum. "We want to know how to use mace⁸." "We want to..." like whatever.

Nadine: So who comes? Who comes to these workshops? Who are the people who participate?

Loira: Initially when we were doing the community meetings to even just start talking about the idea of creating a Sista's Liberated Ground, it was intergenerational. Like there was like some teenage women and then some like older women, you know.

Verónica : Mostly recent immigrants.

Loira: Mostly recent immigrants, with their children and stuff...

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: ...like what comes to...It was like a really crazy mix of people. Because like the, you know, like a 15-year-old's energy, and then you have a 45-year-old mother of three who just got off of work. And, but you know, got into the conversation, got into the dialogues. But we've decided now with SLG to focus it really first on young women and not adult women, just because we've found that with the issue of violence, adult women

⁸ *Mace* is a spray that causes tearing and choking when sprayed in the eyes or inhaled. Civilian use is restricted in the U.S. although law enforcement uses train officers to use it. While technically not of the same composition, pepper spray is often referred to as "mace." Use of pepper spray is less restricted and it is sold as a self-defense product.

are much more vocal in identifying that other problem for themselves and talking about their stories, and kind of just taking over space, you know, which would mean that younger women wouldn't...

Nadine: Oh, I see.

Loira: ...wouldn't talk about, "Oh, this is going on with my boyfriend," or "Oh, this is my going on with my girlfriend," or "Oh, this is happening with my, my brother or my uncle," or whatever.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And so, you know, since this is something, you know, it's like right...different, there's not that many models for, you know, kind of community accountability stuff around violence against women, we're like, well, let's try, you know, let's try to focus first on young women and keep it sort of, you know, keep a narrower view and then, you know, see how it goes and see, you know. Just because it's like when you talk about violence...Even when you don't talk about violence. I remember one time going, you know, it was during the Freedom School, and on Saturdays after the Saturday workshops we have like a big meal with, with everyone and just kind of hang out and chill and stuff. And I had gone to like one of the local Dominican Restaurants to pick up the food that we were going to have, and this woman like, you know, like makes me...you know, she's like motions, and she's like, you know, "Come closer," and I go to her and she's like, "Oh, you know, what's that Sista II Sista place, you know? It's something for women, right? And I'm like, "Yeah, you know, we work for young women, blah-blah-blah." She's like, "Oh, because I'm having problems with my husband, you know, and...and I need some help," you know. So I hadn't even said anything about violence...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, and it's like the response is really overwhelming because unfortunately it's so common, right?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Because so many women are going through violence in our communities. So because of all of that, you know. And I think too it's, yeah, we found this like younger women are...it's a little bit harder, or, I don't really know what it is, you know. I wish like a 15-year-old young woman was here to say...

Nadine: Yeah, hm.

Loira: ...but, you know, to identify violence as an issue. People will talk about other things, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: But especially like interpersonal violence or family violence or relationship violence. Whereas an adult woman will talk about her partner being abusive, a younger woman doesn't tend to so easily talk about a partner being abusive. And so because of that we were like, okay, let's focus in over here. So that's really who we're...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, to answer your question.

Nadine: Yeah. Yeah, I know that's really reasonable...

Loira: ...like four hours later. [laughter]

Nadine: Not at all. Every...every piece that you said was really helpful and I...I learned a great deal about the work in concrete ways. So your name is Sista II Sista. The name of your organization is Sista II Sista. You work with women and young...young women, adult women. But I haven't heard you use the term "feminist." So I'm going to provoke you here and ask you to...what do you think of the term? Do you use it? Do you have a position on it?

Verónica : Well, I personally don't use the word feminist or the word activist, um, to describe my work or myself. Um, and I think it's a...it's partly the reality that in the United States what those two words conjure up for me are middle to upper class white people and, when it comes to feminists, women. Um, ah, you know, throwing off the shackles of...of patriarchy here in the United States and rising up and saying, "I want to vote." And...and so that doesn't...that's not me. And I don't relate to that history and, and so I don't use either of those terms.

Nadine: What about for you Loira?

Loira: Yeah, I'm not no feminist, you know.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: I mean, I don't even...you know, like we're talking last night and...and Veró was like "I'd rather use the word organizer than the word activist," and all these things. For me, like all this work, I don't really name it nothing. You know, it's just like, it's just what I have to do, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: It's just my responsibility, you know. Like I want things to be better and different for people in my community. That's it, point blank, you know. And...and it's not just for women, you know. It's...it's for my community, you know. I'm specifically choosing to work with women because I'm a woman and I think we all have different experiences

within our community, you know. But it's not under like any like word, you know, or...or I don't know, whatever, like those categories are...

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, it's just what I have to do, you know. I just see it as like my responsibility, you know, like...you see it and you don't like you, you can't just sit around and complain about it. You've got to try to do something to change it, point blank, you know.

Nadine: So you don't see your work as, you know, feminist work.

Loira: I would never call my work feminist work. It's just like I...I don't...I don't relate at all to that word.

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: Like feminist. Like it's just...and not even like in the, you know, making a point to not use it. It's just not even in my head...

Nadine: Yeah.

Verónica : Yeah, yeah.

Loira: ...it's not part of my vocabulary even, you know. Like...and it's...yeah, it's like, we...It's definitely not in the vocabulary of any of the young women that we work with. It's not...

Verónica : It's not part of our reality.

Loira: Right, it's just like...

Verónica : It's not like...

Verónica : And I think also like at least from what I've seen in the group, in the Collective, it's been sort of like that is more like on a theoretical...like what you might see in universities, trying to...trying to describe to other people in big fancy words what we do. And it's more like why should we even address or respond or, you know, like play within that...that little configuration. It's not necessary. And that's...I know at least for me in terms of activist, that's definitely what it conjures up, like some...somebody who has extra time on their hands, so that's why...you know, and they feel guilty or whatever, and that's what they do. And it's not...doesn't come from like a necessity. Like, no, we need to do this and...and it's just second nature like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : ...breathing, you know.

Loira: It's funny, that whole feminist thing. Now you got me thinking about it, like, why, you know, like why is it, because, yeah, you know, you're working with women and all of that, but, I think it's what Verónica was saying. It's like for...I don't know for whatever reasons, I don't...I've never studied the history...

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: ...of it or anything, right, but I'm sure there's a bunch of reasons for like why a whole lot of people don't identify with feminism, or the word feminist, or any of that. It's like something has become...you know, it's kind of like how your appendix, you know, how like they...it's like an organ that you have, but you don't really need, and it can be taken out and so, you know, people don't really think about it anymore. You know how peop—things become kind of useless almost, or a non-issue after a time, you know? Like...it's like I wonder about our pinkies, what we really do with our pinkies, you know.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: But, um, I think...I think there's...

Nadine: That is helpful.

Loira: ...there must be reasons for why it's become such a non-factor for a lot of people, to the degree...to the point where it's not...because I think at one point women of color in the U.S. were really trying to respond to the idea of feminism and to mainstream like, white women's feminism...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and came up with like terms like “womanism⁹” and...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...all these other things, right? And I feel like with our generation of folks, or at least the people that I'm around, we're not even trying to respond, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: We just don't even engage it, you know. Because it's just a non-issue...

⁹ Alice Walker's 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* popularized the term “womanist.” The term had a multiple-part definition, the first of which was “a black feminist or feminist of color.” The definition also included aspects of caring about one's whole community—not just women—and spirituality.

Nadine: Yeah.

Loira: ...you know, for us, or something.

Nadine: Well, thanks for, you know, your feedback on that one. That was really interesting.

Loira: I don't know about the appendix, but...

Verónica : [laughter]

Loira: ...I was just trying to say like...I don't...

Nadine: Another thing I thought was interesting from last night's conversation was you had a perspective, both of you, that September 11th wasn't the dividing line of history¹⁰, you know, in the way that it gets presented to us sometimes in the corporate media. I agree with you. But at the same time, you know, it'd be interesting to hear about whether the issues that you work on, the impact young... young...woman of color, immigrant communities have shifted after September 11th, in New York City.

Loira: I think from, from my perspective, I think we all see that kind of differently. But from my perspective, the issues themselves haven't really changed all that much, you know. At least for us in terms of the work that we're doing around women and violence, you know, against women of color. Like it was violence before, it's still violence, it's still interpersonal, still happening all over the place...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...nobody talks about it, you know. It's not seen as a community issue. It's not really dealt with within the social justice movement.

Nadine: Um- hum.

Loira: So none of that has really changed for us, right? But what has changed is the climate that we're working within, you know.

Nadine: Okay.

¹⁰ On *September 11*, 2001 two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, New York. This spurred attacks on suspected terrorists in Afghanistan as well as spurred a war in Iraq. There were many ramifications of these attacks in the United States including increased racism and "security" as well as a burgeoning of patriotism and, some argue, a lessening of certain civil liberties through passage of the Uniting and Strengthening American by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (also known as USA PATRIOT ACT or Patriot Act).

Loira: Because I feel like so many things that got...that were kind of achieved by folks bef—prior to 9/11¹¹ right? Like, you know...

Nadine: Okay.

Loira: ...we were talking about, you know, New York City stuff and during the Giuliani¹² period, you know, people I feel like were so aware, you know, and like had become politicized around how messed up Giuliani was, you know, because he messed with like every segment of the population, from like the average brother that's like, you know, selling drugs on a corner to like your 85-year-old, you know, grandmother on a bus complaining about how Giuliani is like cutting this and cutting that, to your City University student, to your street vendor, to your taxi driver -- like everybody got screwed over by Giuliani, and it was like everybody knew that, you know, and people were talking about it.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: It was very like out in public space -- at least in our communities. You know, I don't know about all of New York City, but people talked about Giuliani all the time. People was cursing him out on the regular, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: Which is great, because people were like engaged in politics and thinking about stuff and...you know. And I think too like in New York City, the Anti-Police Brutality Movement¹³, you know, was really strong to the point where like everybody, you know would talk about how, you know, the cops, there's so much misconduct, and, you know, blah-blah-blah. And like those things got undone by 9/11, you know. Like Giuliani went out of office as a hero.

Nadine: Hm.

Loira: He was a hero, he saved people's lives. "Wow, he was so great! He was at Ground Zero¹⁴". And I'm not trying to be like not sympathetic, like because a lot of people died, and that's never good, that's never like a pretty thing, you know, to see people's like sorrow. But it undid so many things, you know -- the police were heroes. You know, like God forbid that you question the police now, you know. So I think what has changed is the climate, you know, and I feel like 9/11 shut down a lot of doors that had been opened up, you know, in terms of being able to talk to people about different issues, you know. Like people kind of shut down. Like now Giuliani's a hero, now the

¹¹ 9/11 is another way people refer to September 11th

¹² *Rudy Giuliani* was the mayor of New York City from 1994 to 2001. He was in office during the attacks on the World Trade Center, and was voted Person of the Year by *Time* magazine for the way he handled the disaster.

¹³ *Anti-Police Brutality Movement* aims to end police brutality in the U.S. and around the world.

¹⁴ *Ground Zero* is the site of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, where the World Trade Center towers once stood.

police are great, you know, they save people's lives and...So I think that really changed in New York City after 9/11, and not necessarily so much, you know, on the issues, in terms of our Sista II Sista work.

Nadine: Hm-hm-hm.

Loira: I think for other folks, you know, like immigrant rights stuff, I think has changed a lot...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, so I think other segments of the population have definitely been affected in different ways, you know. But in terms of violence against women, 9/11 is not like the...

Verónica : Um-um-um.

Loira: ...the beginning of history or anything for us, you know.

Verónica : Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, and I think also to me, what I really, really noticed is the whole...the way in which now the police can basically do whatever they want. And I do think that it's getting to the point where more people are talking about it, right? Like more people are like...now it's an offense to not stop while you're driving when you see a police officer, like right away like...Like they can give you a ticket for anything. You, you swipe, you pass and something happens on the Metro and they can arrest you for something as simple as, you know, not going back swiping again, they can arrest you for swiping somebody in for free. They can arrest for anything they want, at any time. It doesn't matter what you...you know.

Loira: You can't question them, you know, like...

Verónica : Yeah. At all. And I think that...to...in our communities that was being discussed prior to 9/11.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : Like it was being discussed that they...that...that New York City was becoming a police state prior to 9/11. But then once 9/11 happened, it was like now it has to be a police state.

Nadine: Um-um-um.

Verónica : This is a security threat.

Loira: Now it's safety.

Verónica : Now they...yeah. Now they...Now it's not racial profiling when they stop every Black man in the, in the car. Now it's security.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : Now if you're driving...now if you're riding a bus, what we got to worry about, carrying...taking young women on a retreat because they're going to stop us and they're going to want to take everything out, and they're going to want to look through everything, and...and it just gives more chance for more things to happen.

Nadine: Hm.

Verónica : And so that's really what I see in terms of the work that Sista II Sista does and how New York has changed.

Loira: And there's a climate too of kind of like, you know, like you know that like the Patriot Act¹⁵...Patriot Act's got passed or whatever, and that they really do now have so many more rights and so much more leeway to pry and to harass...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...and to do all kinds of things, right? Into people's lives. And...and I think when at least people that are doing community work in New York City, there is like a level of paranoia...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...because, and there's been incidences, you know, where like some of our allies' offices have been broken into and like nothing gets stolen but their like server...main server computer or something, you know, that has had information

Verónica : Well, how the instance that happened to us. Like the date of our first community meeting for SLG, we had this huge, big policeman just...

Loira: Man.

Verónica : ...chilling outside. And like that's the time...

Loira: And then a station...

¹⁵Passed after the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the stated purpose of the *Patriot Act* (H.R. 3162) is "to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes." The Act provides for enhanced domestic security against terrorism, enhanced surveillance procedures, stricter border controls, stronger criminal laws against terrorism, and increased information-sharing among the branches of the intelligence department, among other things. The Patriot Act has been criticized for removing checks on law enforcement and threatening the civil rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens and non-citizens alike.

Verónica : ...that community members are supposed to be coming to discuss how we don't need to, you know, go to the police.

Loira: And they were stationed in front of our thing for...

Verónica : Like...

Loira: ...in front of our office for two weeks.

Verónica : ...yeah!

Loira: It was like a mobile unit, you know. So just like a lot of . . .

Verónica : Extra . . .

Loira: . . . different things have created...

Verónica : ... created hostility.

Loira: And paranoia.

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: So I think that has also really changed. Like the climate where people are doing work. Where people are much more like, "Oh, we got to be more careful," you know. Like we got to be more sort of aware...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...of, you know, what we're saying, who we're saying it to. How we're doing things, where we're going, you know.

Verónica : You got to keep track of your emails or somehow your email got to somebody else. I didn't send that, how did that happen? All that other...yeah.

Loira: You know, like we can't...got to be more careful in what we involve young women under the age of 18, because the likelihood of being arrested is higher.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: You got to be invol—really, you know, really aware of what we involve in folks in our communities that are undocumented¹⁶...

Nadine: Um-hum.

¹⁶ *Undocumented* immigrants are immigrants that do not have legal permission (or legal documents) allowing them to reside in the United States.

Loira: ...because they can't really afford to be arrested, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And so there's like all these extra kind of precautions and things that you've got to think about post-9/11...

Nadine: Yeah.

Loira: ...that I think are really real and have changed.

Nadine: So you've been talking about local issues, you know. Is there a commitment to linking local issues to global issues? Has Sista II Sista done kind of global-local kind of work?

Loira: Yeah, um, we have, um...we had at one point a Solidarity Work Team, which is really geared at...I mean, I think like again we were saying, you know, right now it's Loira and Verónica talking, and we got...like we're giving kind of our perspective on stuff. But there's a lot of different, really different women within Sista II Sista. And I think one of the things is that...that really shines through is that different folks have really strong connections to different Third World countries, either because they're from there or because of, you know, of family or a friend or...

Verónica : Work.

Loira: ...whatever, work, you know, so people have connections to like everywhere from Mexico to like Chile to Brazil...

Verónica : To Tanzania, to South Africa...

Loira: ...Tanzania. Yeah, you know, and Guyana, like...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...all over the place, right. Because we are, we are from all over the place. And through that there's been...you know, prior to even it becoming an organizational thing of having a Solidarity Work Team really geared towards doing solidarity work with women in the Third World, um, even prior to that there was like informally, you know, you would go and, you know, you knew that there was a cooperative of women in Chiapas¹⁷ making, you know, *blusas*¹⁸ or whatever. You buy, you know, you buy it at their ideal price, you know, what they would ideally want, and then you come back and sell it here, a portion of which will make, stays to your organization, goes back to theirs -- economic

¹⁷ *Chiapas* is the Southernmost state in Mexico and site of the Zapatista revolution of 1994, in which the indigenous people of Chiapas rose up against centuries of state oppression.

¹⁸ *Blusas* is Spanish for blouses

solidarity, a bunch of different things. But then we did the solidarity work team, which was the young women had heard about all the stuff that was happening in Juarez, Mexico¹⁹, with the disappearances of all the young women their ages, you know. And they were like, “Oh, that’s crazy messed up, and nobody’s doing nothing about it.” And so on the International Juarez Solidarity Day in No—back in November a while ago, um, they did a...you know, they organized an action in front of the Mexican Embassy in New York City and, you know, did a bunch of stuff. Got petitions. And then right after that the whole war stuff against Iraq started...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...so they...they turned their attention to doing anti-war work.

Nadine: Hm. Um-hum.

Loira: You know, in solidarity, you know, with folks over in Iraq.

Verónica : And well, we also hosted a Palestinian sister coming in, right? And speaking with, um, the Solidarity Team.

Loira: Um-hum.

Nadine: Oh.

Verónica : Like any chance that we can...that we get, we...we do it.

Loira: To make the connections, right?

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: Because it’s all really connected, you know.

Nadine: All right.

Verónica : Plus also we...we feel that we, like, we take inspiration and we look at models from the Third World. That’s all we...like those are our roots, that’s what we’re working towards, that’s what, you know, we see as important. And also we can’t deny or forget to mention the fact that we’ve had Sista II Sista members go to the World

¹⁹ According to Amnesty International, since 1993 about 400 women have been murdered in this industrial border-city. Many of the women were raped and tortured before their bodies were ditched in desert areas around the city. A large portion of the victims were employed at the maquiladoras -- export-oriented, low-cost manufacturing plants concentrated on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border -- and had to travel long distances to and from work, often late at night. Human rights organizations have worked to find an explanation for the atrocities and assist the families of the victims, but critics say investigations have ground to a halt because of corruption, incompetence and witness intimidation.

Conference Against Racism in South Africa²⁰, the last two Social Forums in Brazil Porto Alegre²¹. So like just...

Nadine: Oh.

Verónica : ...different places where it's very important for us to maintain and build connections and bring it back and...and share that with the rest of us.

Loira: And too, like recognizing that as people of color within the United States -- and this is me, this is like my personal tangent, you know -- but I feel like as people of color that are living in the United States, the analogy that I make is...that was made for me by, by this older dude, one time this older white dude. One time I was really young and I was...I was in some bookstore or something and I was asking him like, "Well, this stuff is so like threatening to the system and so revolutionary, like why...why can we even buy it? Like why do we even have access to it, you know?" And his analogy was like, you know, the United States, it's like...he made the analogy to slavery times, right? And he was like, you know, think of the differences between the conditions that a house slave lives in and a field slave, right? House slave you have some more kind of like amenities and, you know, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, and a little bit of more comfort, and a little bit more cushioning, right? And so you can get caught up in it, and get lost in it, you know. Well, the field slave is a lot more clear, you know, and...you know, pretty like the fact that it can't get any worse than this, you know. Which is the conditions that today, you know, exist in a lot of Third World countries, you know. So I feel like as people within the United States, you know, I think we have like a very specific role, a very particular role that we need to be playing in terms of solidarity with, you know, our brothers and sisters that are in the Third World.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: But, you know, because we are living within the nation that is like...has a huge hand in maintaining the conditions that exist in the Third World, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: And like as people that...that kind of benefit from the comforts and the things, you know, that we have here. Like we have that responsibility to, you know, acknowledge

²⁰ The *World Conference Against Racism* met in Durban, South Africa, from August 31st to September 8th, 2001 to develop programs of action against racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance throughout the world.

²¹ The first *World Social Forum* was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 as a response to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual meeting of the world's most powerful political and business leaders. According to its Charter of Principles, the World Social Forum is "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centered on the human person." The Forum has been held annually in Porto Alegre since 2001.

that privilege and also to, to be responsible about it, you know, to be in solidarity with, so...And then I think it's something that, you know, I'm going to venture out and say I think it's something that a lot of folks within Sista II Sista like feel that way, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: You know, so there is a lot of consciousness around international solidarity and things like that.

Verónica : But also I think specifically in terms of working class-like...like solidarity.

Nadine: Um-hum.

Verónica : Because I think that's it's, it's not a coincidence that, you know, we're mostly working class sisters of color in Sista II Sista, and we're not really showing solidarity with, with the...with the daughters of the owners of Globo Television²² or...

Nadine: Um-um. Hm.

Verónica : ...or, you know, the King of Sudan, you know. We're working more like in solidarity with working class folks, you know, or people who are even under that category, so...

Nadine: Well, we have...I know you know that we have a live audience here with us. So we have a few minutes left so maybe we can turn to them and see if they have any questions before we wrap up. How does that sound?

Loira: Sounds good. Let them talk.

Verónica : Great.

Nadine: After you dropped all this knowledge on me, give them a chance to jump in. Does anybody have any questions?

Audience1: I have a very basic question. First of all, thank you so much. It's been really interesting and I'm surprised at how fast the time went. And I have like a basic question in terms of outreach. First of all, what is your space like? And what does it sort of...if you can describe it. I'm really interested to think about what this space might be like. And also do you have a website?

Loira: Um...

Verónica : Go ahead [laughs].

²² *TV Globo* is the largest television network in Brazil and the fourth largest commercial network in the world.

Loira: We have...our space right now is three kind of small storefronts that are all connected, you know, and so we have...the first room is kind of like, it looks like a living room and it's like a chill space where we have like meals together and stuff. The middle room, um, is pretty emptied out, because that's where we do workshops, that can be like anything from like dance workshops to, you know, more like political education workshops. So for whatever we need to be able to move that around, we kind of keep it emptied out. And then the third space is our office, which is just like a open office, has like a few computers and people just get on whatever computer is open at the time and do their work. And then outreach, what we do for outreach is...we...our main way of doing outreach is going to high schools, local high schools in...in Bushwick, but now also in other parts of Brooklyn.

Nadine: Oh, okay.

Loira: Um, and what we try to do is get into like...and then we have advisory periods in the morning, and so, you know, try to like talk to the principal or whoever, you know, if they're like a cool teacher, then it's like, "Oh, yeah, I want you to come in and talk to my kids," you know. I mean, do presentations, do outreach presentations, give folks information, how they can get involved. Do a lot of cultural events, block parties and stuff. That's like a really good time to do outreach. Go to group homes. Do street outreach at local like hangout spots, at a movie theater or a pizza shop or whatever, you know, and just do a lot of it, you know, because some people will listen, some people won't. Some people will be interested, some people won't. Some...that's pretty much like our outreach strategy, really. Yeah, street, outreach and high school outreach.

Verónica : Out in the field [laughs].

Loira: Yeah. And our website is www.sistaiisista.org.

Verónica : Yeah. And the only thing I would add because you can't forget it about our office is that it's bright. It's brighter than I am [laughs].

Loira: Yes. It's really bright. Super-duper bright.

Nadine: Yeah?

Loira: It's still really bright.

Verónica : We all made our collective pink.

Loira: All the rooms seem bright. Now all the rooms...

Verónica : No, the first two...no, I mean, the last two, right?

Loira: Yeah. Like they're all like just crazy colors basically.

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Some of them are bright, some of them are like earthy kind of colors, but it's like everybody got up in there with their hands and it's all over the place.

Audience2: Actually I had a couple questions. It was really wonderful to listen to you talk about Sista II Sista, and I wondered if you could tell us...you mentioned that you had won an award. What that was for, what work that was for in New York. And also what sort of specific coalitions you've been a part of that might give us a little better sense of what kind of issues you deal with outside of the types of things you've talked about. And then if I could squeeze in another one. I'm very intrigued by, and you didn't have time to talk about -- Um, you talked about how, um, I think Nadine mentioned in the beginning the...the Mission Statement. And liberation and love were sort of put together.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Audience2: And that's really evocative for me, and I wonder if you could talk about what you think...you know, what you mean by that, um, sort of as a philosophy or as a organizing principle in the work that you do.

Loira: Okay. So first question was...

Audience2: What was the award for?

Loira: Oh, it was for the Freedom School program. For the Freedom School.

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: So that was just for doing that work. It was like a recognition, the Union Square Award pretty much recognizes, you know, individual folks or group of folks that are doing I think what they call like innovative, you know, community work or something like that, or really important community work. So that's what it was for...

Audience2: Um-hum.

Loira: ...it was for doing the...the workshops. It was in...

Verónica : 2000?

Loira: '99-2000?

Verónica : '99-2000.

Loira: We have bad memories. I'm sorry [laughter].

Verónica : We can't even say we weren't around then [laughs]. It's just our memories.

Loira: We just have bad memories [laughs].

Verónica : So the second one was about, um, the coalition. And we actually have another plaque from when the coalition one, the Coalition Against Police Brutality²³...that's one of our major ones, which are all citywide organization... I mean city-based organizations, all people of color, right? People of color led and run organizations, working, doing a considerable amount of work surrounding police brutality and combating it. And our second coalition that we do a lot of work with is Third World Within²⁴. And Third World Within, again, is another coalition of organizations that are led and run by people of color throughout the city, all working on a variety of issues, everything from immigrant rights to community-specific issues, to...to workers' rights to...we have everything, in Third World Within. Um, and most of our work originally...Well, actually our work with Third World Within came, like was brought together around the World...

Loira: The World Conference Against Racism.

Verónica : Yeah, the World Conference Against Racism in South Africa and the importance of having people of color from the United States present the work that we're doing here instead of white people going over there representing the work that they do there, even if it's within our communities. And then...but it was so crazy because returning, I didn't even get to return before September 11th. So it was like three, four, five days before September 11th, 2001. And then we didn't even get a real chance to do a report back because it was so much in response to this crazy propaganda machine that started after September 11th. And then most of our work has been surrounding anti-war initiatives as a coalition.

Verónica : ...asked to do a report back because it was so much in response to this crazy propaganda machine that started after September 11th. And then most of our work has been surrounding anti-war initiatives as coalition.

Loira: Really, I mean, I think that the thing with TWW and the anti-war work that we were focused on doing was really bringing in like a justice analysis...

²³ Created in 1995, the *Coalition Against Police Brutality* seeks to mobilize grassroots organizations, students, and community members in a movement to stop what the coalition considers to be an ever-growing police state in New York City.

²⁴ *Third World Within* is a network of New York City-based people of color organizations that makes connections between people of color in the U.S. and Third World peoples who struggle against the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. According to TWW, policies of global restructuring are fundamentally based on race and gender oppression. TWW seeks to establish the presence of people of color presence in the protest against global injustice and explain the many connections between human rights violations in the Third World and in the U.S. itself.

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...to the anti-war movement in New York City that was totally missing, you know, and connecting the war abroad to the war at home and making those connections that, you know, the larger...

Verónica : People were...

Loira: ...anti-war movement wasn't making. And so that's really like what we focused on. We did a few events, we did a cultural event, we did some rallies, we participated. We did a people of color mobilization during the February 15th large mobilization²⁵ in New York City.

Verónica : Which in...which I just wanted to add about the February 15th, is I don't think that most of the...most of the rest of the United States or the rest of the world really knew how many people really got to the streets that day because they refused to do a panoramic, but there were tons of people there, present. And then after that, we did...

Loira: May 19th, on Malcolm X's²⁶ birthday...

Verónica : Registration.

Loira: ...we did a...it was a campaign called Weapons of Mass Resistance, and it was just the idea of like really countering, coming up with strong like messages and getting propaganda out into our communities, and stuff just to counter like the message that they were starting to put out, that the war was over, that the war was won. Like, you know, to be like, no, it's really not over, it's really only going to get worse, like don't, you know, don't believe...

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: ...the hype. Did anti-recruitment work locally in Bushwick, you know, um...

Verónica : We did that, but the rest of TWW did it in their own communities too, right?

²⁵ On February 15th, 2004 the New York City chapter of United For Peace initiated a huge (500,000+ people by some accounts) mobilization against the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

²⁶ *Malcolm X* entered public life in 1953 as minister and national representative of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an Islamic Black separatist group that fought for a state apart from white people and taught that white society actively worked to keep African-Americans from empowering themselves and achieving political, economic and social success. His charisma, drive and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members, and X was largely credited with increasing membership in the NOI from 500 in 1952 to 30,000 in 1963. In 1964, X lost faith in the integrity of the NOI and broke with the group. From that point on, relations between X and NOI became increasingly sour. On February 21, 1965, X was assassinated by three NOI gunmen although it remains contested as to who really ordered the assassination—the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam.

Loira: Or like different groups did different things within that community.

Verónica : Different forms, yeah.

Loira: But the goal was really, of that campaign, was to do local commu—do anti-war work in your local community as opposed to mobilizing to bring people to Manhattan for like big...

Verónica : Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loira: ...you know, white-led kind of marches, you know. Like really go back to your own communities and, and build with folks on the street level. And I think the overall thing about TWW that I think really good and that is interesting is that it's like us trying to be in solidarity with each other, you know. And so, you know, say for example, when DRUM, Desis Up and Rising²⁷, was doing their series of rallies against the special registration²⁸ at the INS²⁹, like they kept calling us and being like, “Yo, we need, we need two more people to come do security, we need somebody else to do this, we need somebody else to do that.” And also as a way for us to educate our own communities about each other's issues, right, because there's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding and discrimination and a whole lot of things, right, that lead people of color to, to not interact in a, in a good way, right? Even though we sometimes share the same communities, there's a lot of prejudices and a lot of misinformation. A lot of times we'll all believe over each other what the mainstream media is telling us of, you know, each other one, or whatever. So it was...we also kind of see TWW as an opportunity and away for us to be learning more about each other's issues, right. And so all this backlash against Arab folks and South Asian folks, you know, this is like a moment that our sort of working in Black and Latino communities can, you know, do some education around, some political education. Like what, what is the difference between Palestine and Pakistan, you know?

Nadine: Um-hum.

Loira: They're not nowhere near each other. I mean, you know, we laugh, but it's, it's just real because people are watching television. That's where they're getting their information and that's what the television is telling us, you know. And I think that's one of the things that's really kind of special about the TWW thing is that it gives us a chance

²⁷ The organization that Loira is talking about is actually called *Desis Rising Up and Moving* (DRUM). “Desi” is a term used by Indian people in the diaspora to describe themselves. DRUM is a community-based social justice organization of low-income South Asian immigrants in New York City founded in 1999

²⁸ An additional form of government registration that immigrant men have had to undergo since 9/11. It assumes that many immigrants are dangerous criminals and are in need of registering, even after they already have to go through the INS procedures.

²⁹ The *Immigration and Naturalization Service* of the United States, the state office that issues immigrant visas and oversees citizenship and naturalization services.

to work on inter-, intra-people-of-color stuff, which I think is really important and not always necessarily be focused on responding to a larger white something or other, you know.

Nadine: Um-hum. And then she had the question about liberation and love.

Loira: Oh, liberation and love. That was like the...

Verónica : L.L.

Loira: ...the flower children³⁰ part of somebody...

Verónica : [laughing] Which you came up with.

Loira: No, that wasn't me. That wasn't me. It wasn't me.

Verónica : [laughing] So who was it? It was somebody.

Loira: We just...we just redid our mission last October, um, just because we...(1), thought there was a lot of language in there that wasn't direct, and you can't...you didn't really know what it meant, you know. Like, who...

Verónica : Yeah. It was long.

Loira: Like what is this mission for? Like who the hell can understand this, who can read this, you know? And also like a couple of other, you know, shifts of...instead of saying young women of color in this broad sense saying specifically Black and Latina young women. Because that's who we've always been. That's who we always work with, so why not...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...be just specific about that, you know, and... Um, and the communities that we're particularly dealing with and then...And then also because young women of color like, you know, lot of times you have to translate stuff into Spanish and the whole people of color thing is not translatable, like into a lot of languages. It doesn't make any sense if we put it into another language. And so we were like, you know...you know, for a bunch of reasons started revisiting the mission and the language of it, and everything. And the liberation and love thing was like we were just like, well, what do we want, like...We want people to treat each other with love, and we want people to feel free, you know. And like free from like oppression and stuff. So we were just like...

Verónica : We need liberation, so that's what we want [laughs], you know.

³⁰ The term "flower child" was born with the hippie movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The term comes from the hippie habit of wearing flowers to symbolize peace and love, and is used to refer to one who advocates universal peace and love as antidotes to social or political ills.

Loira: Liberation, yeah. And we want our people to be free, you know, and so...

Verónica : Yeah.

Loira: ...I think that's where the liberation part of it came in. And I think that the love part, you know...

Verónica : Is just at the basis of all of our work, right?

Loira: ...try and like revalue that, you know. Because...

Verónica : Um-hum.

Loira: ...I think like ideas, really basic sentiments of like love and caring and things like that, we sometimes take them out so much of political stuff because they sound kind of mushy or whatever. But it's really like, you know, good values, things that you like would want. You know, you would want people to treat each other with love and to value life, you know, like at the end of the day, so...I think that's our liberation and love trip.

Verónica : [laughs]

Nadine: Well, I know I've been really inspired already to get out there [laughter] and start working after this. We are deeply, deeply grateful for you two coming out here and sharing with us all this knowledge and teaching us about everything you do and, ah, just, you know, big thanks go out to you.

Verónica : Thank you.

Loira: Thanks for having us.

Verónica : Yes.

Loira: It's cool. It wasn't that bad I was thinking at first but...

Verónica : [laughs]

Loira: Okay.

Verónica : And if anybody else wants to contact us, you have our website, right. So please do it.

Loira: Thank you.

The End