

KK: So I guess I just wanted to start with having you say your name and where you're currently located, and if you like to, maybe what you're looking at or the scene that you're around.

DO: Sure. My name is Dunni. Dunni Oduyemi. I am currently in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. I'm in my little home office, and I have a view of another apartment building, so it's my little nook where I get work done and stuff like that.

KK: Nice. And then I guess to start with, going back in time, do you remember what your first impressions were of Columbia when you started as a student?

DO: Yes, I remember going on a tour of Columbia, because I had done this pre-college summer thing at Barnard. I think I must have been a junior in high school. And I remember having a tour of Columbia, and I didn't really like it. I didn't like the physical campus, and I didn't like the feeling that I had there, but I think something that did make me like it was this rich history of activism. I loved the city, stuff like that. And I think when I actually started as a student, I like—I don't know, I think I had a hard time figuring out like who my people were, where I wanted to live on campus—you can have such a different experience depending on so many variables, I feel like. So, my first impression wasn't that great, and I think it took a little while for me to fully warm up to the whole Columbia experience.

KK: Do you remember your first impression of campus politics, or what sort of the vibe politically was when you arrived?

DO: Yeah. I remember living—I lived in one of the dorms where, as a first-year, you could have a suite, so I didn't have a roommate, but I had maybe like 8-10 suitemates. And I remember sometimes we would go out for a meal together and we'd be sitting in the dining hall and I feel like I had a little bit of a maybe culture shock, because I grew up in New York and then I moved to Geneva, Switzerland when I was like 8, and I think I had such an international education there and almost everyone's parents worked for the UN or were an ambassador or a diplomat and our education was kind of—we learned a lot about contemporary politics. So I remember learning about things like Israel and Palestine in high school, and I remember then having some conversations my first year of Columbia with some people who lived in my suite and feeling like, 'wow, people have a completely different outlook here,' and I thought it would be a lot easier for me to find my people.

And then I remember seeing a lot of protests happening on campus, so I think I always knew that there was a, not balance, but a little bit of two extremes at Columbia, I feel like. Because I would always see people protesting, whether it was like Student-Worker Solidarity or Students for Justice in Palestine, or there were so many different groups that would have—I mean, there were even more right-wing groups that would have protests and stuff like that at Columbia. And so there was always a dialogue. I think I was kind of not always sure where to find the kinds of voices that resembled mine. I think especially because you spend so much time at Columbia working on the Core your first couple years so you are really focusing on Western history, Western philosophy, and obviously with that comes a lot of conversations about slavery, colonialism, and in the course of those conversations that we would have in Core classes, you also realize, okay there's a lot of people who don't want to question like the idea of natural slavery or capitalism or whatever it is. So it's not shocking to see that there is this conservative current that runs through the whole school. And I think particularly during the period of time that I was there, there was this ongoing conversations and, I think, there has been since at least the 90s, but about gentrification, which as a concept I don't think I really understood when I first got to Columbia. And then through the course of the years there, gradually understood more what that meant.

KK: Yeah, do you remember your initial sort of involvement in campus politics? Did you start with Students Against Mass Incarceration, or was there something else?

DO: Yeah. I think that was the first involvement. I was really involved with campus journalism, so I had started working at the Spectator as a copy editor my first year, and then I had started working as an associate features editor for the arts and culture magazine, and then I had started working as the editor-in-chief there. And so I had kind of gradually gotten more and more involved in journalism, and I think because of that had more of an eye on what was going on on campus. I had friends that were involved in Students Against Mass Incarceration, and I knew that they were holding a lot of open meetings and doing a lot of political education, just trying to get more people on campus thinking about prisons and police. And so I decided to start going to their meetings. I ended up also living in the Intercultural Resource Center [IRC] on 114th, which was a kind of hub for a lot of Black student organizers, and also a lot of the political education events would be hosted in the IRC. So once I started living there, it was also a lot easier to get involved in Students Against Mass Incarceration and the divestment campaign. But I think I had just started going to their meetings, and they had such a non-hierarchical, very democratic approach to the organizing that they really welcomed people no matter their experience with organizing, and we found ways that we could all get involved.

I think, particularly at the start, my experience with campus journalism was a helpful link because I was able to get certain messages to the right people if we had a press release and stuff like that. So I think the combination of where I was at with student journalism and then kind of getting involved in Students Against Mass Incarceration and the IRC helped introduce me to the campaign against private prisons.

KK: And do you remember how CPD formed out of Students Against Mass Incarceration?

DO: Yeah. I think Students Against Mass Incarceration was already an existing student group, and they had—I know Asha and I think one other member, I'm not sure who—were looking at the Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing [ACSRI]. They were looking into their website and, I don't know if it was online or actually in-person, that they made a

request for more information about how Columbia's 8 billion dollar endowment was invested. And they ended up getting a list, I don't think the list included everything. But from that list, they were able to see that there was, I think, roughly 10 million dollars invested across the Corrections Corporation of America, G4S, and I think Geogroup, I'm not sure. Yeah, I think it was those three that we initially found. And from there, I think Asha and whoever else were able to find that list brought it back to the wider group and kind of just started strategizing about what the best next steps would be.

And I think the way that we officially launched the campaign was we wrote a letter to President Bollinger and he, at the time, taught a class and we knew the time and location of that class, and so we had gone to his class and like written all over the board, we had written our message, I'm not sure what it was now, I'm sure it's in our Youtube video. But we had written something all over the boards, we had printed out a letter, and as he was walking into class, I went and delivered the letter to him, and I asked him for a meeting, and he did agree to a meeting. I think we did have to kind of push him on it. But he agreed to a meeting, and that was kind of when we—not that was when it was officially launched, 'cause there was obviously work that had gone into it even before that—but I think that was our first official action. I might be wrong, it might have been something just amongst students before that. But yeah.

KK: So, CPD came out of Students Against Mass Incarceration. What was that sort of initial group like, or group culture like, and what were your initial conversations about strategy and goals?

DO: I think because we were coming out of Students Against Mass Incarceration which was a group that was already like an abolitionist, anti-capitalist [group], they had a lot of events on campus just kind of like on the history of the prison system in the US, its ties to slavery. And then at the same time there were a lot of conversations going on, probably nationally, but definitely at Columbia because a book had just been written—I can't remember who by—but about the roots of slavery within Columbia and who built the campus. So I think because that was going on and more of a national conversation about reparations, there were a lot of opportunities for Students Against Mass Incarceration to really just do public programming on... And I think also at the time mass incarceration was coming to be understood more in the public consciousness. Obviously it's not a new-new term, but just that 2013-2016 at Columbia, I just remember there being a lot of events that focused on that. So I think that being the roots of Columbia Prison Divest, we always were rooted in a larger, like obviously yes, private prisons are bad—but more broadly prisons in general are bad and violent. And so we never wanted it to be a super liberal campaign of, 'guys, all we have to do is get them to divest from private prisons and like we'll all be good.' We wanted to keep it within a much bigger message of prisons are being used to subordinate largely Black, poor, immigrant, different marginalized groups within the country, and private prisons are just a small part of that, but here's how we can leverage our power as students to help with this one thing, and hopefully keep the ball rolling because there were also other divestment campaigns going on at the time around fossil fuels and also Israeli apartheid, so I think we were also all in conversation with each other also. Yeah.

KK: Yeah. That's great. There's so many things in there that I want to ask you about. But I'm curious how you thought about not making it that liberal messaging around prisons. Did you have conversations about how to keep that messaging more expansive?

DO: Yeah, we did. I think especially because we knew that the way that we could successfully win the campaign was through lobbying the Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing, and they had a very specific process that we had to go through which involved a petition showing a student consensus, giving a presentation to them. And we knew that for those two things that we would need a certain kind of messaging that would be appeal to the mostly liberal students, faculty, and even for the advisory committee we knew we couldn't necessarily go in with the same messaging that we would have at a Students Against Mass Incarceration meeting.

And something that was really helpful: Dr. Carl Hart helped us a lot with preparing for our meeting with the Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing. I think he gave us a good perspective, just in terms of like what are these representatives of the administration going to do, and how might they also want to co-opt this moment to make them look like they were on the right side of history. We were really conscious of that, so we tried to really tailor our message to who was receiving it. We had to be very strategic with the advisory committee and also to get this broad consensus amongst the campus, which I think we were successful with. But yeah, we did have to keep trying to like—we made a zine for example, that was all about our campaign and just about how students could get involved, and we would make sure to include examples of the abuses that go on at some of these detention centers and private prison facilities. And we never made it seem like these are things that only happen at private prisons but rather these are things that happen at all prisons, and as part of the—you know, the economic impetus behind mass incarceration is only one part of it, but that as long as we have this industry literally lobbying our politicians and being invested in by our educational institutions, you know, that's one piece of the wider puzzle.

So I think we always tried to contextualize it, but also I do remember we would be frustrated with certain things like—I was just looking back at [an article](#) that George Joseph wrote for Jacobin and it mentions that in the first article that the Columbia Spectator did about Columbia Prison Divest that they erased any mention of Palestine. And that was something we had mentioned because one of the groups that Columbia was invested in was G4S, and at the time G4S was creating technologies and running, I don't know if they were actually—they had a presence in Occupied Palestine, and various human rights abuse campaigns were also against G4S. So there were little things like that where we could see parts of our message were being completely erased by different institutions. And also within Columbia, I think that was an aspect of it that was often erased. Because we knew that especially President Bollinger, because of his history and his involvement in a certain kind of liberal politics that there would be almost an incentive for them to co-opt our movement and make it seem like, 'yeah this is a great thing for the university, this is a great thing part of our history.' Whereas we knew all the repression

that we actually faced when we were trying to run the campaign. So it was an uphill battle because we knew there was incentive also for the institution to play both sides and make it seem like they were on the right side of history, but also made us really jump through hoops.

So messaging was like one of the most important things. We talked about it a lot. I think that's why we did try to do a lot with media, just 'cause we knew if we made sure got our voices out there, that there might be less opportunity for the kind of liberal messaging that we had to do for, for example the ACSRI, and to like get a broader coalition of students on our side would not be like the end-all be-all.

KK: Did you feel like you were successful with that kind of double messaging or saying different things to different groups?

DO: Yeah, yeah. I think to a certain extent we were, because I think we were able to... It was also this moment of a lot of student organizing and the roots of Black Lives Matter. I remember a lot of student interest in policing and prisons, and a lot more attention to abolitionist politics rather than criminal justice reform. So I think, in a way, we were trying to integrate a lot of that into our campaign, and we were able to, I don't want to say "convert" a lot of people, but we were able to make our case to a lot of people and I think a lot of people learned a lot from our campaign. At the same time, I think it's hard because internally, the process we went through with the ACSRI, we often felt like if we didn't put a ton of pressure on them, like we had to keep emailing, we had to keep pushing back on certain things, even if it was to do with language in a statement that they were running by us, we really did have to keep our checks and balances in place. So I think on that side, it's hard to say. 'Cause it was successful in the end, so I think that is a testament to our strategies. And I think at the same time, there were definitely moments amongst us as students where we wished that certain things had gone differently, even just in terms of how certain actions went and how the administration responded.

'Cause even like, there was a lot of faculty who supported us, but I don't think there was that— yeah, there was a lot of faculty that supported us, and there [were] a lot of people who made statements in support of us. I think even amongst faculty, I remember there being some who were, not skeptical, but who wanted to emphasize the fact that the private prison industry is not constitutive of the entire problem of mass incarceration or the problems we have with prisons in general. I can't remember who, but I do remember that also being a thing of we wanted support of faculty, but we also had to remind them that we were just trying to strategically win our campaign and not that we were making a kind of liberal argument of 'the private prison industry is bad but like regular or federal prisons are alright.' So I think that was one of the things we struggled with. And that it's really hard to say, I guess, how we did on it. Yeah, I'd be curious how the people who experience the campaign from the outside perceived that part of our messaging.

KK: Yeah. I'm curious, you mentioned this earlier, that there were other kinds of divestment campaigns on campus. Were you talking with them? Were you working with them? What were you learning from them?

DO: There was a campaign to divest from fossil fuels around the same time, I think they might have even gotten started before we did. But I'm not sure if we went through the same route as them. But, I do remember that we were frequently in conversation with different leaders from that group. I remember, I think her name is Olana came to a lot of our meetings and we did share a lot of, not even tips, but we would go over what is the ACSRI's process, how do you go about it. And since I think the first step was getting a broad consensus amongst students there was solidarity amongst us all: you know, we would sign their petitions or if there was actually a resolution we could vote in, we all supported each other like that. And same for Students for Justice in Palestine, but I think because of the way that organizing around Palestine has always been repressed at Columbia, I think they had more difficulty. I think it changed after, but I don't think that they were able to launch an official divestment campaign the same way that we were just because of laws against BDS [Boycott, Divest, Sanctions], but I could be wrong. I just remember that being something that they, I think, were working on but not sure what that actual outcome was. But I do know a lot of SJP students supported our campaign, and I think especially because we did make sure to include that G4S was one of the companies we were targeting, there was opportunity for a lot of collaboration, even just teach-ins and stuff like that. So we did collaborate with them.

KK: How did you decide on your initial action of handing the letter to Bollinger?

DO: I think we wanted something that would be—we knew from the start that President Bollinger would probably want to be involved in some way or at least be seen to be involved. And we also knew that if we almost ambushed him at his class and had this moment publicized, which it was, that it would put pressure on him and the institution to meet with us. And I know something, I think because I was the one who went up to him and said and like handed him the letter and asked for the meeting, we put an emphasis on the fact that, I think at the time it was like a Black person dies in prison or police custody every 28 hours. So we really put an emphasis on just how violent these institutions are, and we knew that that would be a way of really putting pressure on Bollinger. And doing it in his class, I can't remember what it was he taught, it must have been something to do with the law?

KK: Free speech, or the—

DO: Yeah, exactly like the constitution!

KK: The First Amendment.

DO: Yeah, exactly! So we knew if we did it in front of his class, it would be a good opportunity to just create some dialogue, so I think that was why. And yeah, I think he agreed to the meeting, and then we had to follow up. But I do think almost the publicity and publicness of it all probably made them move a little bit quicker at first.

KK: Yeah, 'cause I think I've seen that video, he says like, 'We'll arrange it,' or something.

DO: Yeah, yeah.

KK: And so he accepts in that moment. And then what was the process of actually getting the meeting?

DO: Yeah, I think after that we either, I guess, simultaneous to doing that, we must have emailed his office? There must have been arranged via email after that. I think we had to probably push for it to be sooner. Because from what I remember, it was very much like, 'okay, we'll meet with you in eight weeks,' and when we were scheduling things with the ACSRI, it would be even longer. When it came to meeting with President Bollinger, I think we ended up setting up a meeting, and a few of us, I think they told us how many people could go. We sent a few of us, maybe four of us went? And we just walked over to his apartment or whatever the—where the president of Columbia lives. And we had a meeting there. We must have met with him maybe twice over the course of the two years, I believe.

KK: And were you in that initial meeting?

DO: Yeah.

KK: Or do you remember that was about or what you talked about?

DO: Yeah, I remember we basically went over, introduced ourselves, we talked about the campaign. And I think he was, from what I remember, he expressed that he was in support of our campaign. I think he may have suggested that we go through, or let us know that our only option was to go through the ACSRI. Can't quite remember. But I think it was, you know, almost like a political meeting. Like, he took our meeting. We went, I made our case, nothing major happened. There was nothing from him that was like, 'I'm going to make this happen.' But I think our impression was always that he was vaguely supportive of the campaign, and wanted it to seem that way as well. Yeah, I can't quite remember from there. But I know that we spent a lot of time preparing for the ACSRI and the student petition and that kind of bureaucratic aspect.

KK: Right, yeah. Was ACSRI already on your radar at that point? Like were you going through the process of doing those, that whole bureaucratic thing?

DO: Yeah, they were definitely on our radar, because that was, I think, how Asha had initially found out about the investments. And they had let us know, or maybe it even was on the website, what the process is if you want to make a case for divestment. So we did that. We had a student petition. I think we had a huge amount of support from student and faculty. And then there was a presentation aspect, we worked on the presentation for the ACSRI, which Dr. Hart helped us with. I think it was me, Asha, Ella, maybe Bryant. I think for the presentation that was it, but there might have been others. And yeah, we just worked on a presentation for them. And I can't even really remember what the room was like now, but it was kind of just like a corporate meeting vibe where we went in and like had these slides. And, yeah, it was kind of unremarkable. I don't even think there was a ton of questions afterwards, but it was kind of like a proposal in presentation form, or we were just like, 'here's why you should divest and this is what these companies are responsible for.' And I think also just making the case that for a committee on socially responsible investing, this is why it's socially irresponsible to be invested in the private prison industry. And we were able to show that we had overwhelming student support, and yeah.

KK: The meeting, there's like three minutes left, and so whenever it shuts off. Can I just send you another meeting link?

DO: Yeah, of course!

KK: If you have like 20 more minutes?

DO: Yeah, no problem!

KK: There was also a student petition going on? Was this happening simultaneously? Or how were you showing student support?

DO: Yes, I think we did, I'm trying to remember what order it went in. Let me see on our timeline. I think...Ok yeah, I think we did our presentation in April 2014, so a couple months after we had talked to President Bollinger, and then we did our petition. [Reads from computer.] Okay, so then actually the 'ACSRI hosted a community engagement panel on private prison divestment and students voiced their overwhelming support for divestment.' So I guess they hosted something about a year later, and that's when students voiced overwhelming support, but at some point, we did do a petition. I think it must have been earlier on in the campaign, maybe just to show the ACSRI and President Bollinger that we had a ton of student support. So it might have happened in like spring of 2014.

KK: And at the same time that you're going through the ACSRI process, which sounds very long and bureaucratic, you're also doing demonstrations and public stuff. I guess this is to the point of different messaging—how were you balancing that? And did you have a strategy there about how to maintain both?

DO: I think we didn't want to get too bogged down in the super bureaucratic stuff to the point that we were not actually organizing the students on campus, so that was always the priority, I would say. But at the same time, I think we tried to strategize around who had the capacity and was able to spend time on the presentation, the ACSRI stuff, I think I helped a —[zoom cuts out]

[Zoom cuts back in]

KK: I think we were talking about the demonstrations that you had at the same time...

DO: Yes. We were super aware that there were certain moments where the ACSRI was dragging their feet or just taking a really long time where it seemed like between, we would do whatever stuff we were supposed to like getting a petition with this many signatures or after we had given our presentation, and it felt like we were being ignored at different points or like it was kind of getting lost in all the bureaucracy. So we would try to use demonstrations as a moment of putting pressure on the administration to move faster, trying to make our coalition even bigger, and then also just trying to capitalize on different moments that were already occurring on campus. I think we hosted a whole week where we talked about prisons and policing at different outreach to people on campus. And I think we were also taking a lot of inspiration from the 1980s campaign to divest from apartheid South Africa and we were able to host a panel with some of the organizers like Barbara Sporn and a few other people, because—Barbara Ransby—sorry I misspoke, her daughter is Asha who is obviously an organizer with us. So there were a few moments where Barbara or Dr. Ransby really supported us, obviously giving us advice from her perspective as a student who had been a part of the campaign to divest from apartheid South Africa and we did host a panel with them. They reminded us of not just the continuation of the struggle against white supremacy, colonialism but also the administrative repression that they faced as students and how it continued on just through different means, really. But yeah, we knew that the priority should always be the actual organizing of students and using our voices rather than getting bogged down in the administrative process, especially as students, cause we were also having to balance having to study and work and all these other things. So yeah, I think that was always the priority, trying to make sure that it was a student movement and not like, 'okay, we just sent our proposals to the ACSRI and ticked a few boxes.' You know, that wasn't the campaign. We knew that that was just what we had to do to get through to the ACSRI. So yeah, I think we tried to stay really consistent with maintaining a presence on campus in terms of our actions.

KK: And you touched on it briefly, but what were the institutional repressions? Were you thinking about punishment and risk involved?

DO: Yeah, I think within our divestment campaign everyone had roles, things that they were maybe more interested in. Like I know maybe Asha and Bryant were always part of the political education and part of the direct action leadership because of their experience. And I took part in a lot of the direct actions, but I wasn't a leader in that, and I took on a lot of media organizing. So I think we tried to put people kind of like where they felt comfortable taking risk or where they felt like they could best use their skills. I think when it came to direct actions we knew that there were—like we did a sit-in and we did a die-in and I think with both of those we had really explicit conversations about risk. But with both, they involved a lot of other student groups, and so I think it always becomes something different. Because we knew that, for example, that for any of the core members of CPD who for whatever reasons, for especially our Black or queer student organizers, that there were certain events where they might not have wanted to be the person who is having to liaise with police or is having to be the person who at the end of the day is incurring any punishment or disciplinary action for an event. So I think we did try to plan around scenarios like that.

But I think we, for example, did a die-in, I think it must have been in December of either 2014 or 2015 and I think it was at the tree lighting ceremony and it was I think it was right after the verdict that the police officers who killed Eric Garner had been not convicted or maybe not even charged. I think that was the impetus for us organizing that die-in. So it was, you know, Students Against Mass Incarceration, the Black student organization, a ton of different student organizations that all took part in it. And I think within a couple minutes of it starting, they called the police on us. And this was, I think it was yeah, December 2014. And I think we knew after that incident—because it was the tree lighting ceremony—not to rely on any kind of fake idea of 'we were peaceful so we didn't deserve it,' not saying that. But it was two minutes into us laying down and the police were already there. So I think after that action we all knew that the administration, really as much as there were moments where they tried to seem like they were on our side, they really weren't. And so I think we kind of had a more, we realized that they were always going to mobilize police, for example, so that was always a fear. Yeah, I think after that we had such a, I don't want to say antagonistic and I don't think we were surprised, but I think we were all so disgusted that that happened that we were really reluctant to work with certain administrators. For example at the time, Deborah Spar was still president of Barnard and I remember she hosted some kind of town hall or something like that after that event. And she was kind of trying to cover over what had happened because there was so much anger and like upset on campus at the time. And I remember that there were students thanking her for hosting the town hall and for even talking to us and I remember afterwards being really angry that students had basically been thanking her for hosting a town hall even though the administrators could have gotten someone seriously injured or killed just by inviting police to a really, actually very small protest at the tree lightening ceremony. So, I think we struggled with kind of how to organize on a campus that is as heavily policed as Columbia is. And also because there had been an exposé on how Columbia and the NYPD had spied on Muslim

students for years, there had been a lot of things like that, where we were already kind of feeling like we have to be really careful. And then when I was editor-in-chief of the Eye, which was the arts and culture magazine at the Spectator, I remember a student, who also lived at the IRC, had written a like a long-form piece just about the ways that Black students were profiled and like the way that public safety which was mostly retired NYPD officers, the ways that they intimidated and harassed and profiled Black students, so I think the atmosphere was already so—like we were already dealing with that—that it was actually really difficult to get around some of those barriers, and we were really fearful of the ways that the administration and public safety could just make a call and have NYPD there.

KK: How did that change post that arrest? Or I'm not sure people got arrested, but the police getting called. But how did that change the tenor of the messaging or like the strategy you were going for? It seems like it was maybe a really significant moment.

DO: Yeah, I think it was significant for all Black students on campus because we had, yeah I think it was just such a low moment like on Columbia's behalf like there was a lot more mistrust and a lot more anger at the administration and I think if anything it was illuminating of the kinds of ideas that we were trying to introduce to the student body anyway, which was the ways that Columbia is being repressive on this super micro-level are part of a bigger picture of how Columbia uses its endowment to also further these violent systems. And not to be like—you know that probably sounds very self-centered—but I just mean that Columbia is a part of a bigger machine and that it's not just an education institution and you don't just go there and study, it exists as a financial institution and also as an enforcer of discipline when it comes to the people who work and study there. Yeah it's not just somewhere we go to class and we live there for a few years, we have more at stake, just because of the amount of money in the endowment and the amount of money that we as students we either pay or the amount of money that we generate for Columbia as workers. So I think it was really eye-opening, not that it was the first or last time that Columbia has called the police to a protest. Yeah, I think it was just because the feeling on campus at the time, it was just so bleak, and that set off a lot of mistrust that I don't think was ever regained. So I think we went through with the rest of the administrative ACSRI process almost very resentfully, because we obviously didn't want to be, if we could have gotten those results just by direct action and communicating with just a few key people that would have been great, but we had committed to a certain process of engaging with the ACSRI. And obviously it's not like they were directly the ones who were involved that day, like calling the police on us. I think we were just seeing more generally the ways that, as students at Columbia, they really only care about you to a certain extent and just how disposable you are vis-a-vis the institution, especially if you are shining a light on certain things.

KK: Because, I don't know, it sounds like there was a 'oh, we're supportive of your cause,' initially vibe. And like that really shifted. Was there—how were you—I don't know if I have a question, but I'm just curious for you to say more.

DO: Yeah, I think what we realized—I think obviously all the Ivy League schools, they all have their own PR and they all have their own reputations. Columbia is obviously very invested in being seen as the 'Protest Ivy'; it has a really rich history of student organizing and faculty organizing. And on the one hand, yeah, that is true, there has been. But on the other hand, it's not you know Columbia patting itself on the back for that when, in all likelihood, like all of these student movements, the students have probably been through hell and back just to get their degree.. So we knew on the one hand that they were likely to be receptive especially to a super liberal approach of private prisons are bad, it was very much a moment of people were talking about private prisons across the country, so we thought that Columbia might see it as an opportunity to launder their own reputation by saying like, 'oh, we're the first school to do this, we're the first Ivy League, we're the first private college in the US to do this,' and being that first, how good that is for Columbia's own reputation. But at the same time, when you're the students who are actually trying to pressure the administration into divesting, you know it was not a walk in the park.

And there was a lot of—you know if we hadn't put the pressure on them, it's not like the ACSRI or the President Bollinger would have been one day like, 'oh my god, private prisons are awful, let's like find something else to do with this 10 million dollars.' But it's almost like—I was looking back at the statement that Prez Bo gave after everything was announced that everything would go through with the divestment, and the first person he thanks is the ACSRI as if they had kind of just come up on their own and they had gotten a broad student consensus, when it was like 'no.' If Asha and her friend had not asked to see that list that day and brought it back to Students Against Mass Incarceration, they were obviously the first people who should be thanked. So we were right; we knew that they were going to try to do that. Especially knowing that President Bollinger was kind of at the end of his tenure, we knew that something like this, like being able to say that he was you know part of the reason that Columbia was one of the first institutions to divest from private prisons, that that was so easily going to be co-opted. Yeah, we all saw it all coming in that sense. But it's hard to obviously, there's nothing that we could do, except in our own. We used social media, we used talking to media as much as we could to resist that, yeah.

KK: Yeah, so it sounds like the co-opting, you knew it was coming, it was kind of inevitable. Was it kind of like this is what it's going to be and we can do what we can, but also we want to play into their egos a little bit because we want them to think they're good people?

DO: Yeah, I think we were trying to strategically, like obviously we knew that we couldn't control exactly how, for example Prez Bo's statement when he said everything to the student body and thanked the ACSRI first, it doesn't really matter because we knew that (A) we did our best to preserve in some ways exactly how the campaign happened. Luckily, we do have a timeline, we have all of the emails we sent, the zines, the articles, the interviews, that all exists. So I think we tried to maintain our records, so just because we did get such a broad coalition of students supporting us, I think everyone else

remembers how it happened and the fact that the administration, like it took two years for a reason, not because the administration was so excited to do this. So we didn't give up just because we knew they are probably going to try to co-opt certain things. We tried to make our messaging super, super tight, especially when it came to talking to other students, cause we also wanted to make it something of like maybe these students had never heard of private prisons before, maybe some people haven't heard of mass incarceration. But if people are able to from this glean what is wrong with policing and prisons in the US then that is such a huge change, versus focusing on the administration and the powers that be which, not to say that we couldn't effect change there, but just knowing, it makes such a big difference for the students, faculty, workers on campus, community members that we were able to organize with, learn from, like teach, I think that was the upside rather than focusing on the fact that inevitably the kind of machine of Columbia is going to absorb what happened and try to kind of rewrite for part of their liberal narrative of what Columbia is. I think we all knew it's super important to just name that that happened and was happening, and yeah hopefully that makes sense.

KK: Yeah, totally. Were you also, I think you just touched on this, working with people outside Columbia or organizations? Obviously, there's a really strong tie to gentrification that you seem to be making. So what did that look like?

DO: Yeah, there was a group—I'm forgetting what they called themselves—there was a group on campus that was working against gentrification and they were particularly partnering with Taylorn Murphy, I think he lives in either the Grants or Adams projects on 125th, and he was very active in the Manhattanville area and like very anti-Columbia's expansion in the region. So I went to a lot of events and there was a lot of kind of activity around that. I'm trying to remember specifics, I can't quite remember the name of the student group, but I know that Taylon Murphy was quite a big presence in a lot of that.

KK: I guess I wanted to then about the end of the campaign, and ask what your experience of that was?

DO: Yeah I think it was going into summer 2015 when they had announced, the ACSRI announced that everything, all the pieces were in place for divestment...let me double check...yeah it was in March 2015 the ACSRI voted unanimously to recommend divestment, and then in June 2015 the Board of Trustees announced the decision to divest. So I think that was kind of when things kind of died down, and then that summer I think we did a lot of media, we probably even in the fall returning, maybe just talking about what the next steps were, we were also very much like we don't want to be like, 'okay Columbia divested, thumbs up, great job Columbia, you guys are awesome.' We didn't want it to be like that, and we very much wanted to continue, especially having seen how other student, faculty, community members had shown up for us, and we wanted to almost continue like via the Students for Justice in Palestine and also the fossil fuel divestment. We very much wanted you know to just like the momentum to keep going. So it was like, yeah, it didn't quite end even after the decision.

KK: Did you have conversations about holding Columbia to their promises?

DO: Yes, because part of it was that we wanted them to—we knew that A. they would announce it but when is it actually going to happen, and then also we knew that we wanted there to be a clause not then reinvesting in the private prison or in policing and prisons in some other sinister way. So I think we were in a period of monitoring what's going on and making sure we followed up pretty frequently.

KK: And they eventually, do you know when they eventually did divest?

DO: It definitely would have been in 2015. I guess end of 2015 at some point. The Board of Trustees announced it in June of 2015, and that's when our timeline ends. Trying to see if there was an email after. Yeah, I mean I don't think we got an official update, yeah we didn't [have] a super official follow up, so I'm wondering if Columbia emailed everyone at one point? [Dunni is looking through her email] Yeah, I don't see...an official, seeing just articles that were written in the summer of 2015 about the divestment, so I think it happened in summer 2015, but that could have just been the announcement.

KK: Ok, yeah. Do you have, now looking back on it ten years later, do you have like reflections on it? Like, oh, that was a really big success, or was this a loss, or was this something that should have happened, but we didn't do that?

DO: No, you know. I definitely think it was a success, not just in terms of we got Columbia to divest, but I just remember feeling so—we were all really, maybe not surprised but we were happy with the support we got from students and community members, and I think we were also resistant, because of that anxiety that we sometimes felt around like A. not wanting it to be a part of some liberal narrative of Columbia University as being like in any way like inclined towards racial justice, and then also not wanting to create some kind of binary between private prisons and prison as one being worse and the other being acceptable. I think because of those anxieties, we were never like oh let's give ourselves a pat on the back, we did this. So I think I still look at it as a success in terms of organizing a student movement. I think we really did our best to frame Columbia's investment in prisons as a piece of the problem of mass incarceration while still contextualizing that through gentrification and through its relations with everything from the NYPD to Israel that Columbia still takes part in the kinds of racialized violence that we were talking about in a lot of our political education. So we didn't want it to be like, yeah we won the campaign, now all these other things don't matter. So it's hard to say—it would feel almost disingenuous to say, 'yeah we were a success,' because the way that student organizers are repressed now, in a way Columbia really hasn't changed, which is not to say that we would have ever been a way to do something to stop Columbia from being the machine that it is. But just that obviously based on the fact that Columbia is still invested in so many different violent systems in a way, yeah like how successful were we? Since that was just one piece. So yeah I'm torn, because I don't want to say that

it's not meaningful that the 10 million dollars that were invested in, but it's almost in a way I can see how it was a symbolic victory for Columbia because now even if you look it up they are still the first I think US university to divest from private prisons, which torn, you know. It is really annoying that that could almost be used to Columbia's credit when it was a result of 100% student efforts and organizing. It's a good thing that the divestment happened, but whether or not, I almost think that you realize so many of the holes in the whole process, for you know [ACSR] and their process of divestment. I think going through it we almost realized how we were, I don't want to say lucky, but even just based on the fact that Students for Justice in Palestine were not able to launch a divestment campaign in the same way just shows you the futility of it. Where it's like, yeah we were able to using those methods get the results we wanted, but at the same time it underscores the fact that you actually don't get anything without the organizing aspects and without making demands and taking up public space and disrupting something. Because at the same time, we wouldn't have been able to achieve it just going through a petition and doing a presentation. So yeah I'm kind of torn looking back. Also just because the stories I've heard from students who were, not even students because I don't know anyone who's currently, well I only know grad students and PhDs at Columbia, from what I've heard it's even more difficult to organize there than it was 10 years ago. It's sad that the kind of continuity of the same tactics if not worse, because it seems like they've found more ways to police people and more loopholes to disciplinary actions. Yeah.

KK: Yeah, it's like the most extreme punitive measures. Yeah.

DO: Exactly, and even on a class level, I'm thinking back and I'm like I don't think I would want to be in my core classes arguing about certain topics because I thought things were bad in 2012 but I just feel like there's such a, like you can't even... I don't know, it just seems like a really difficult time for student organizers at Columbia and Barnard, and like there's a lot of ways that even just your teachers can punish you.

KK: Yeah, totally. Well before we totally wrap up, is there anything else you wanted to add that you were reminded of that we didn't really get to talking about?

DO: I don't think so. If anything, I feel like I remembered things that I had totally forgotten, but I think yeah, I feel like we covered most of everything. I wish I remembered more of our actual events and like interactions with the administration. But yeah I think we covered everything.