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**Joachim, Jean Dany, oral history interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis, May 5-6, 2018;
Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project; Cambridge Historical Society**



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Oral History Interview with Jean Dany Joachim

Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis on May 5-6, 2018

at Bunker Hill Community College, Charlestown, MA

Lina Raciukaitis: My name is Lina Raciukaitis and this is an oral history recorded as part of the Cambridge Historical Society Caribbean Oral History Project; today is Saturday May 5th 2018, it is 5PM and we're at the Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown, Massachusetts with Jean Dany Joachim. Jean Dany, do you consent to being recorded for this interview?

Jean Dany Joachim: Yes, I do accept.

LR: So I'm going to start with some questions about your early life history. First, what is your full name?

JDJ: My full name is Jean Dany Joachim. Jean Dany Joachim. That's my full name.

LR: And when and where were you born?

JDJ: I was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in the year 1962 on the day 15 of September. September 15, 1962. In Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

LR: Where did you grow up?

JDJ: I grew up there too, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, I spent all my childhood there. This is where I went to school until I left the country. This is where I started to work; this is where I started everything that I am today.

LR: What was the – what was your neighborhood like growing up?

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JDJ: Neighborhood. I will speak of the last one, the one from 8 years old until twenties when I left the country. It is called Lamentin 54. It's a long long long street, very long, that started – that starts from the main road and headed into the sea. I mean, as you can imagine, it's an island, almost every street could end into the sea (laughs). Yes this street is very long, very interesting. At the top of the church – of the street – there was a church on the main road that's called Saint Charles Church, and there were a few Protestant churches inside the street itself, but at the same time there were six voodoo temples, we call that *peristil* in our Creole language, six of them that I can remember. I remember their drumming at night for their different festivities, going to bed and listening to the different sounds of the drumming, and also at times being interrupted by the bells of the church, the main church, a Catholic church, to remind people of the time – one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, you know. That's a – that's a great memory. Yeah. Thank you for making me think of this! (laughs)

LR: And were those, like, were those churches for people in that neighborhood or from all around the city?

JDJ: Let's say the churches are for everybody but all neighborhoods have churches. This is a place – the country in general – people are believers, *you know*. You hear praying, singing, church activities, and at the same time the many cultural happenings around voodoo, that is part of the culture of the country, of the, one of the religions of the country. But for many different reasons it takes a long road for it to be recognized as such. And also I think because it is also in so many parts of the people's lives, that's why it is not, for some, seen as a religion. Because the music you hear under the temple, the *peristyle*, what we call *peristyle*, it is, it is the same rhythms you find in drumming for dancing, for different places, *you know*, the same rhythms on the street for Carnival. So because it's everywhere sometimes people, they had to say "ah this is, this is praying, this is a ceremony, religious stuff" or this is just music for dancing and mundane activities, yeah I think so. *Yeah there for everybody, everyone.*

LR: Were you part of one of the religions?

JDJ: I was born, I went to Catholic school, when I – very young, so therefore we went to all the traditions, first communion, confession, confirmation, and more and more and more, all of them, we had two, three of them, all of them by school requirement, and I grew up seeing my family going to church, Catholic church at the time. But at the same time, I grew up remembering my grandmother had an altar at home, that is the voodoo – the altar with the saints, the images of the different saints – I say saint but in a voodoo religion, in the voodoo religion

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they are called lwa, spirit, they're called lwa in our Creole language and each one has a particular name, and there is that too. So therefore, I know it all, I know both. And then as I told you there were six peristyles on my street so later on, when I – I think I was – when I was 17, I decided I wanted to discover this mystery myself so I started to, as much as I can, to go sneak in to learn, to see closer what's happening. I did not learn much, but, at least I did I tried, yes. I grew up there, of course I went to all the rituals of the Catholic church, and then later on we have – where I go to school I had friends, their parents were Protestants, different denomination, so therefore some of them would come, different people would come to the house, they decide to speak of God and, I was a very – I was very curious, very early age, *you know*. I wouldn't mind to talk to anyone about anything so I said sure, if you wanna talk about God – well as long as no one will ask me let's convert to my religion but let's come, so I met with different groups you know, on Saturdays this group will come to my house, on Sundays this one, so. There was a time, I remember in my youth, when I was 16, 17, 15 so that were the age of discovery when you're reading philosophy and you want to make sense of everything, that was the time I did these things, yeah, interesting.

LR: And where were the names of your mother and father?

JDJ: Oh, my mother. My mother is Ika, her name is Yvica, Yvica Liron, but all her children call her Ika – but we cannot speak of my mother without speaking of my aunt. My aunt brought me up, she raised me. I was 1 year old when I was brought to my aunt. I heard that my father snatched me away from my mother and took me to my aunt, his older sister who, who just got married, who did not have children at the time and, so that's the story. And I heard that story broke my mother's heart and she would come to the house every day until I fall asleep and my aunt would tell me – another interesting story to write, *you know*. Two women and a child, *you know*, they love each other, they know each other, but I think because of – my mother didn't have the means – my mother and my father they didn't, they were not together under the same house as I live with my son and my wife and thing like that no, no. So, my mother had to work, so I think one day my father went to visit then she find out my mother – he find out my mother went to work and I was left with a neighbor. That's the way of home, you know. It's a – it's a village concept. I imagine – I heard the story he asked somebody to clean me up and he brought me to his sister. And of course the sister welcomed me, she didn't have children at the time and, and then later on my aunt will told me – “I told her, you know I had to tell her, but please you need to not to come every day, if you come every day he will never get used to me, to us.” So these two women, negotiating about how – the welfare of this child. So I imagine the pain of these two women dealing with this situation. That's something I have to write about. Thank you for making me think of that.

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LR: What was your aunt's name?

JDJ: Hermance. Marie Hermance Joachim Yeah. But although her married name is Madame Ulrick Noel. Madame Ulrick Noel. She is one of the most important person in my life. I mean, the two of them, it's a – *yeah, yeah*. It's a, it's a bit difficult, talking about them now. Life goes fast, you know, life goes very fast. They no longer exist, *you know*, they both died. First my mother Ika and then my aunt. And I'm talking about them in another country that's a – that makes it more strange (laughs). Yes, two very important women, very different and they knew each other. Something between the two of them is silence, *yeah*. They both, they practiced silence, *yeah*. They use it well. I learned some of that from both of them. You can see silence in, in any of their gestures, *yeah*. My aunt was a quiet person, very quiet, but – and my mother not so, she had to be very active, *you know*? This woman came from the, from the countryside to start life in the city, in the capital, which is the condition of many women from there, many people. Men and women. So when you come to the capital, nothing is given. You have to make life. And my mother did. At one point she was very successful. In the downtown of Port-au-Prince, she had a good business, many people in an open market, many vendors *you know*, selling for her, *you know* she was very successful. She did it, she made it as an entrepreneur, starting from nothing. But unfortunately, the difficult – one of the difficult moments, political moments, situation, just destroyed everything she had. You know, when there is instability in the country, commerce and anything else can't work. So therefore people have to eat whatever little economy you have, your economy can't work anymore so you end up eating it until you have nothing left. You – that's it, you struggle. It was painful to watch. This woman who, who helped so many people, and at the end she, she really had to struggle to, to make ends meet, so. Well in any case, she did it. And my aunt equally did it in another way. Their struggles were different. The story of my aunt is that Ulrick Noel, the husband – when I was, when I was 7 years old I think, I think I was 7 or 8, he had to leave to come to the U.S. because there was a possibility to come, they figured out it was a good time, he had a good profession, and then he came here, trying to start, to make a start for the family. But unfortunately, he faced a very difficult tragedy. When he came here, the process to get his green card was, was another woman who stole him, literally, *you know*. But he had committed and took care of all of us, *you know*, sending money every month for the house until he could bring all the children back to the U.S. – Petition for them to bring them here. Although that this woman he paid for his green card but this woman took him hostage, you know. Hey, a good man is hard to find so you grab one by all the means you can. That's what some people do, so. Yeah I think he did that, he had painful stories. But that's part of life, that's part of the immigrants' stories, immigrants' realities. Those things happen. In search for life, *you know*, families get destroyed, it's not only the economic

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security but sometimes some deep wounds are created and they stay forever. But nevertheless, it was a great life looking back, with all the natural things around us, with all the difficulties. If I had to be born, to reborn and start again I would choose that same place, I would choose my mother, I would choose my aunt. I would choose the same people, yeah. No regrets, at that level. Yeah.

LR: Did you have any siblings?

JDJ: Oh yeah, plenty (laughs). Plenty of them. So. I was the first one at my house, my aunt's house. [walks to pictures on the wall] This is my aunt right there with my son, with Danyson.

LR: Oh!

JDJ: That's her. And that's her picture there, young picture. That's her.

LR: Next to Billie Holiday

JDJ: Yeah. When she just got married. And then, that was my mother, that is a picture of my mother - an artist did that so, from the black and white picture just like this one. *Yeah*. So therefore, I was the first one at her house and then her first child was born a year after me, and after that there will be 4 more, so we were 6 there, so I'm the first child. And I was also my mother's first child, after that my mother had other children so I grew up with many on both sides you know, my mother's children, my aunt's children, my father's children, *so*. I am in the middle, I am very lucky *so*. I was the first known by all of them, and I was lucky, liked by all of them, you know, and, yeah. I was a good link between all of them, or I am. Some of them don't exist anymore, I lost a sister, I lost a brother in Haiti, so that's - *yeah*, my mother's children, two of them died. Also - I also saw pain in this woman's face, anguish, just the look in her eyes, deep sorrow. *Yeah*, I wrote a few poems about her, about her situation, things I have seen, that's the way I could express them. I did. I wrote a - after my sister died and then my brother died and then I visited her. Again, silence. Just her eyes looking at her and, and I see a level of pain and I wrote a small poem, very few lines that says: "What a pity for a mother to bury her children. Who am I to tell life what to do?" And that's all. Things must happen in life. Why does a mother lose her children? Like so many whys in life - why war, why, destruction, why misery, why - anyway, let's stay away from poetry, let's continue with your talk.

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LR: I was gonna ask you when you started writing poetry.

JDJ: Oh, you know I agreed to do this interview, but I didn't realize, I didn't know it was going to take me to deep places (laughs).

LR: Are you feeling okay? We could stop.

JDJ: I never thought, *you know*, I'm trying to exist in Cambridge, to survive, to do different things. I never think of a memoir, *you know*. I'm trying to write when I can, read, or celebrate poetry or arts, but God, talking about these things makes me look back. For example, you asked me when did I start writing poetry, instead of that, I'm gonna speak again of my mother. I discovered my mother in another way. First, I know she's my mother, but it is when I first discovered the condition of my country in the years that I first started to think about it, I discovered her through discovering the lives of many women struggling. After school, I was 15, I would – on my way home, since the bus station was next to the big open market, one open market in the capital in the middle of the city, and she was there selling different things – clothes, with other women, some of them selling for her. Things were okay for her at the time, but she still had to go there to take care of her business. And when I would go there to kiss her, to go to my mother on the street, I'd look at all these other women selling too. And I started to think, and I would – that made me think of other women who didn't have to sell, other women teachers, women, you know, different level of life. And I was writing already, but I remember writing about these women. I did. I wrote an early poem about them. Yes, writing came to me, writing - the writing I remember is the one that, that is part of my engagement; it is the protest writing, writing to say something, to be part of a movement. Writing and theatre. Where I lived, in that long street that I told you earlier, I met a poet, he was also an actor. He was connected to a big theater group in the country that was considered subversive because they were – it was an avant-garde group theatre that their plays, first of all, their plays were in the native language, you know, Creole, Haitian Creole. So that meant their plays were understood by everyone, people who go to school, people who could speak French, and people who couldn't speak French. So the dictatorship did not like that. So I met Rodrigue Montfleury. He's that poet, that actor that I told you. In my language he's a *sanba*, what they call a *sanba*, someone – he can compose songs, *you know*, he was a songwriter, he was a great artist, he was a great actor on stage. And I met him, and for some reason he took me under his wing. I remember I wrote my first poem that spoke of the country and I brought it to him, and he read it and then I – after that, I remember myself standing in front of him as if waiting “is that okay...” I – for me it was the right of passage, as if he said “yes, now, you are one of us” you know, without words but I remember he read it and

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then, this is it. I still have this poem. In Creole it says “Onè respè lasosyete. Onè respè lasosyete” it is as if to say, “knock knock, here I come, society.” I remember this one. And I never stopped writing. Later on I, I joined this theater group - that was after that guy I talked to you about, I told you about, Rodrigue Montfleury that’s right, after he died - He died very early, he was in his thirties, yeah. Very early. So, the theater group did a big celebration for him so I was invited to read some texts because I was always around so I already knew most of the songs so I was part of that so, I think that opened the door for me to be – to start doing theater on the big stage. So my writing, my writing is born in the context of the country, *you know*, of the time, always. And even after I live so many years away from the country it’s hard, very difficult for me, to write anything that doesn’t have the struggle or the life of the country in it. Even my love poems then spoke of the country (laughs), yeah, this is it, the country that made me, *you know*. I discovered that I could be useful through discovering the challenge of the country. So yes, I started writing poetry and then, later on I – I collaborated in the group when writing pieces for plays that we would put together, it’s mostly texts and songs – texts and songs, texts and songs. A bit later I went to the National Theater but that’s – that’s different, you know, that’s a National Theater. Not the same philosophy of that theater group that I told you about that’s called KPK, Konbit Pitit Kay. Yes, I met many artists, many poets, dancers, and artists are everywhere in the country. Everyone is an artist (laughs) *you know*, life is a big stage there *you know*, you see, yes, happenings. - There’s always something happening. Between free dogs on the streets or people wandering, yup, *yeah*. Yeah, writing. I wrote a lot. That was a way to, to exist. A lot of poetry – that’s what I knew, that’s the first form I knew and – in my language, in Creole, I started to write in Creole. I didn’t choose the French much for my art because I embraced the cause of the theater group, everything was in Creole, we wanted what we do to be accessible to the mass, to everyone, so therefore we stayed with it. And then later on for a long part, for a big time, for a long time I – I boycotted the French language somewhat, I didn’t want to use it when I saw, when I noticed, what they use it for, to keep some people away at the time, so I didn’t want to be part of it. Of course, I went to school, I knew it, *you know*, the education was in it although I didn’t have to use it to speak it every day but that’s the language the instruction was in, in Creole - in French. But later on when I started to work, collaborate – and I collaborated with some people from other countries who spoke French so that was – they didn’t speak Creole. This is when I started to use the language as a language, as a means of communication. And I really use – discovered this language, and I like it. You know, I love the French language, I really like it - when I came here, I discovered a great community of people – North African, Canadian, and people from Europe, so in my early time in Cambridge this big community of people, that was the language we had between us, not much English, you know, all these foreigners speaking French (laughs) when we got together and, yeah. *You know*, from Malia, from Morocco, from Algeria, from Belgium, France, Canada, all this group of people here, I don’t know how we

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end up meeting each other but that was the language. And also in my early years here I – there's this French poet, I read him a lot, I traveled with one of his books – God that was the book that helped me to, to challenge my solitude. Jacques Prévert, it's a book called *Paroles*, it's a book of poetry, *Paroles*. Yeah. And when the language is used as a language I like it - and being here I have published a book of poetry – actually I've published two books of poetry in French since I live here, *yeah*. You know, language is just – language is a tool. You use it, you know it, use it for what it is that's all.

LR: And it depends on where you are, like in Haiti it might be – it might have these other meanings around it but here in Cambridge it's different –

JDJ: But here I discovered it as a means of communication, and it was good, I like it. And because I work for so many years at an institution of education, students from all over the world so, I end up speaking it when I meet students from other parts of the world and that's their language, so. Life is good. *Yup*.

LR: And you mentioned that when you were going to school, you spoke French and you went to a Catholic school for some time?

JDJ: Yes, oh... everything was Catholic (laughs) for this time, for a long time. Historically, after the Haitian Revolution, the school system was created by what they call, Les Frères de L'Instruction Chrétienne, FIC - it's the Catholic Church, *you know*, that established the school system there, French based. So that's the model the country followed, everything was in French. But, that also created some trouble for the sense that not everybody went to school so the elite quickly got this language to – to make themselves feel superior and to keep the people who can't speak the language as inferior and somewhat, and there is, there was always this quiet drama going on. So I remember going to school in my time, wherever – I mean everywhere – there were signs saying "it is forbidden to speak Creole at school" so the native language – that's the push, you have to speak French, imagine. So, I remember, I was 15 years old going to a priest school and I started to boycott, quietly boycott that rule, forbidden to speak French- to speak Creole. So what I did, since I couldn't speak – if you spoke Creole you'll get, *you know*, punished, sent home or do this, but what I did, I started to speak bad French. I mean, just creating words, funny stuff that don't exist in the language, *you know*, based on the Creole and, and when I started to do that, students would be laughing everywhere, and the priest school that- couldn't kick me home because hey, I'm speaking French, but I just speak it my way! (Laughs) so, I think that, that was art. That was also using art to – to do rebellion. So I did all of that. *Yeah*. But I did also push at one point to do a

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play in Creole in that same school. I remember the school had a contest every year; it was a school of almost five hundred students, no more. Four hundred to five hundred students.

LR: And what age group was it?

JDJ: I started there at 15

LR: Ok.

JDJ: So you were there for four years, it's after second – when you finish primary school and that was a school for – a trade school, *you know* - After I finished primary school I – I started high school, I did two years of high school and then I went to that particular school as a trade school in order – after 4 years to have, to have a profession, something I could work in, survive already and then can continue school later. So there was a tradition of theater in that school, to have a play every year. And I remember the priest – one of the priests meeting with all the groups by years, by categories, to tell them to give you a set of plays, different of them, different names, but they were all French. So, I remember meeting with that priest with a group of students my age, my class and he gave us – and then we're looking and then he was looking at me because apparently my face expressed something and he told me "what's going on sir? Is there a problem?" I said, "Yes, there's a problem. My language is Creole and all the, all these plays are in French. I don't know why can't we have plays in Creole." And then he looked at me, said "OK, therefore you're on your own, you go do your own play." So, for me that was the open door. He didn't punish me, but he said "Go ahead" *you know*, as if "you disrespectful little boy, go on your own and do your own thing" and thing like that, and he left. And the students, my colleagues, my classmates, they were terrorized, said "man! You're putting us in trouble, what are you doing to us?" I said "we'll take care of it." And then, I started to write a play and I went to see my friend I spoke to you earlier, and then, he helped me. With the students we wrote a play, in Creole. We wrote a play based on a situation that existed in the country for a long time. Haiti is an island divided in two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. So, there was this tradition for a long time, many Haitians – it was a business between the two governments to send people to work in sugar cane plantations. The Haitian government would collect money on those people and they would go there and they would work almost in very harsh difficult conditions. And these people will live there, don't have enough money to come back to Haiti, they end up living there, having children, having families there. And their children are not considered neither Dominican nor Haitian. So a tough situation, so we wrote about that. We wrote a play based on those people working on this – difficult situation. And then

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that was our first year. My first year, and we won. Every year there was a jury, *you know*, each – you go on stage, each group will go to perform, and the teachers were there in front with, with score cards from 1 to 10, and we got 10 – all 10's. And that same teacher, I saw him, the priest cheering as a cheerleader and since then, we continue writing in Creole. And that was the first in that school, yeah, it was the first. We did it. That was a victory for the language. Now looking back I think that was very important. Yup. Art again, the power of art – what you can do with it. The beautiful thing, the joy, you can sing nature, you can write about the sun, the moon, the ocean that circle that country. But it can help you to challenge the harsh, harsh life situation there too. And we use art for that. Yup. I forgot what was the question, but, I guess I'm just talking, talking, talking.

LR: It's ok! But it was about the school, just in general –

JDJ: Oh the school, *yeah*. That was one happening in one school, I went to different schools. Later on, when this school was over, when I got my diploma, as a machinist, I started to work and then I continued to go to – to finish secondary school, what is called, yes as you finish high school, it's the baccalaureate system. And then after that, to start university, yup. And working at the same time, always. Doing art, going to work, and surviving. Yup.

LR: What was the work like?

JDJ: What was the work like. When I went to school, I went to, no not to school – when I, the job – I worked in a, as a machinist at what is called a machinery shop. This is part of a big industry inside them that makes parts for everything..., Utensils..., that called Haiti Metal. And we work – I, when I said we, when I got there, I found students who graduated years and years and years and years before me from my profession, from that same school, and they're already working there. So every year my school would send students, people working there. So I got a job there. Not from the school, I got it on my own because – but when I went there I found people who went to that same school with me, studying that same thing. Yeah, this is where I worked for a while until, until I got kicked out because of course I created trouble. I organized the people. Organized the union, I created a union inside the place. Because, what happened – I discovered a great injustice when we went there. All my friends in the shop because we went to school we had a diploma, we – our salary was somewhat ok at the time, we made \$150 a month, some fifty-something cents or ninety cents something an hour, I don't know. Anyway, for the time it was ok, somewhat ok. But, you had the common people, the people working in different situations than us. They're making less, they didn't make that money, and they didn't have any privilege. For

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example, we had the benefits of if we're sick we could stay home. If you're sick you could get sent to the hospital I think and get paid. Those people didn't have that. We could have, I think vacation? I think so, yeah. We had, we had these rights. But when I realized all the people inside the factory didn't have that – so with my connection from arts and outside, so I somewhat organized the people inside, a few. And then we created it. So that starts and suddenly, we started to represent all the other workers who didn't have any diploma, any qualifications so, and that was a big deal. One of – part of the challenge I couldn't let my aunt know all of my activities – can you imagine? We have these people, older people coming to my house and asking for the president (laughs. At my house they didn't know that I was the president of the union, *you know*? I remember those strange stories, these people would come to my house on Sundays, asking for help, how I can help them, lalala to tell me their situation, and it was – I had to find a way to hide that from my aunt, I don't know why at that moment I didn't tell her. But she knew, she knew everything about me, my deepest secrets she knew, she has a way. Not that she spied on me but we were so close, *you know*, she knew. And of course she is the person who set me free to be me, *you know*, to do things. And I remember later on she told me – we talk a lot, we talk a lot when we traveled, when I came to the – I was here in the U.S. and later on she came – we talk a lot a lot. She would tell me how she would never sleep every night until I come home, how, how she would know when I come home quietly, open the door and close the door (laughs). In my head I thought she didn't know, I thought I was so good, *you know*, I – but yeah, she knew. Yes, so at work we created the union so that's the way I got fired. I was very organized and we did it methodically with all – we organized all the workers so the owner of the school – I mean, of the factory – the way he had to, he just closed that shop. He closed it completely, kicked all of us out. Pretending that it's not about the union at all, it's simply because of reorganization that he didn't need that for his industry and we were all fired. And automatically my name was put on the blacklist, I could never work as a machinist again in that country. It's a small country, when you are – when you're tagged – it's like the, imagine it's like the FBI, what the FBI would do on people in this country. When you are tagged, that's it, wherever you go, they know. And I couldn't work so, pfft. I let it be, I never worked again as a machinist. I started to work in education, non-formal education. Teaching people to read and write using theater and poetry and working with people. Yup, until I had to leave. You're making me talk about my life. Whas that the intention? Ok. Alright. What else should I say, I don't know.

LR: So, what made you leave?

JDJ: It was an accident. It was an accident that took me out of the country, and it is also another accident that kept me away from the country until I end up living here. Accepting Cambridge as home. Or choosing Cambridge

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as home. Either way I say it, but being in Cambridge forever all this time. Now that I live in Cambridge longer than I lived in my own country. A friend of mine at the time lived here with her family, close friend, dear friend. And she was in an accident. Their house was on fire, I think everybody had to escape but she jumped from a second floor window. She was in a coma. At the time... (*background noise, shouting*) the cleaners are coming. That's life in America, those are the immigrants coming quietly to clean the school when the school is closed. And these scenes that happen movie theatres, restaurants, all over. If you're a native you may never know that, because that's not part of your life. You see, here they're loud, they're alone, they don't know there's anyone, they come with their language and music and they will clean the place spotless. So what do we do? Do we continue or...; they're passing by.

LR: We can pause.

[The interview ended for that day, Saturday, May 8th. We met the next day, Sunday, May 9th, at Bunker Hill again, to continue]

JDJ: Ok. The year was 1989. 1989. I came as I told you, because of an accident. A friend of mine, a dear friend of mine was in an accident. Their house was on fire and everybody ran. I think she jumped from the second floor so she was in a coma. So a friend told me of the situation while back home and they said you need to manage to make it, otherwise, you'll not see her again. So, with complications, a lot of complications, we managed to get a visa to come here to the US to visit because there is a lot of complication, plenty of complication around getting a visa when you're from certain countries, to come here. So when I came in, I think we're gonna start with the same problem with the cleaners.

LR: It's Ok.

JDJ: That's Ok?

LR: Yeah

JDJ: Ok. So when I, when I came, although she was in a coma I arrived straight to the hospital, Faulkner Hospital in, near JP, Jamaica Plain area. The night I arrived, so I stayed in the hospital with her. And then she woke up at night and she spoke. You know, we talked, we had a long conversation. And one of the problems with the

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medical team here, they didn't know what to do, she didn't speak much English and she was in a coma, the family was not here for too long so it was very difficult. Her case was difficult. So therefore, the next morning I told the doctors that she spoke. So they took interest in me because she communicated with me at night and in the morning she went back to the coma again. So, the person in charge of her care I think they wanted to use me, you know, to communicate between her with the doctors in terms of medication, what to do. So that was my involvement right away. And this is what happened. That's how I got involved in her case, in her situation, and she got better. For a while, I think for a week like that she will talk at night with me and the next day she goes back, so the hospital was very pleased with the fact that they know now she gets in and out of it. And, so I stayed to help. They took care of my staying for a while. I was supposed to be here for a month, as I told you I had to go back, I was part of a play, a big production that was going on but while I was here, the other accident that made me stay... – there was a *coup d'état* in my country, a political uprising. Difficult situation, political situation, and I had my... – my people were in hiding so therefore with that situation it was difficult for me to go bring my head there. It wasn't safe anymore. And especially the activity, theater, the work that we do, used to do, there was no room for that at the time. And since then things get more and more complicated, politically. And as time passed by, my father was here, and there was always a petition for me to stay here but that wasn't my choice, you know, because I had life there. Then, this is it. I've been here since, that was, that was never my plan, to live – I didn't see myself living in a foreign country. That was never part of my dream, regardless of how things are, because I was part of the change coming up. I was involved, I grew up in it, I discovered myself, I discovered the country, I discovered all my surroundings in participating in that change that was happening. So I never envisioned leaving. So, then life started here, it was difficult for the fact that, you know, you are cut with everything that you knew, you know. Imagine the arts, the theater, the community activities, many. I had many lives there, *you know* I was involved in different branches of life and activities. And here, first to, to solidify the language, I could speak English, I could, but for anyone coming here, when you learn English abroad you come here to use it, first you face the situation of the different accents, different people from different parts of the country, even in Boston, different people speaking differently. At one point I could say what I wanted but I couldn't hear back what people said all the time. And then, how to find art when it's happening in another language, different than what you used to know. So I slowly, I slowly started to look for art, and I found art. I remember the first place I went, there was a book store in Porter Square, I forgot the name now. It was in a basement building, a bookstore, and then they had poetry reading, poetry slam I think. That was the first time I went to something like that in the basement. I remember the joy, the excitement, *you know*, just to be part in that environment again, and a room full of people reciting poetry. I wasn't writing in English, I didn't have any, *you know* I, I was trying to speak to exist in English at the time but I didn't attempt to write in English, not yet.

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And then I look for more places like that, and then I discovered – how did it happen? I started to meet poets I think, I don't know. But one thing I know, I waited long enough to participate, to be part of it, of these activities, then there was the language. I started to write in English, I think I wrote my first poem in English, it was in 1990. And then of course it was about home, it was about a street back home. Saying "I remember you, Saint Martin Street." Yeah, it's a long poem, it's a poem about that street, about life in that street in the morning, what happened. You know when you – when you're away you're remembering a place or your questions... You're not there, you're no longer there so that was my first poem, about that place, in English. Then, *yeah* I continued writing, reading, but the focus was still home, was still home. And then later on, I discovered it's more difficult to find myself a place in the artistic life that's already existed here. And then I created my own (laughs) *you know*, I created my own. When I started to work here at Bunker Hill, I created a reading series that's called *Sunset Poetry Series*, and I discovered there were many people with interest, with the desire for artistic manifestation, celebration, but they didn't know how to put it together, so I take advantage of that. Stage readings, I did that for many years here and then later on, I took the same model into the city of Cambridge, a reading series that still exists, it's called *City Night Readings Series*, where once every three months I invite poets, writers, artists too for an evening of art celebration, you know, literary art celebration, musicians, *yeah*. And then I, I discovered, I discovered the arts. One of my greatest discovery – I mean, not discovery, I was happy to be here for jazz. I love jazz. Man, I got crazy with jazz, I listened to it, I used to go to the Wally's, I discovered the Wally's Jazz Club, it's a place on Mass Ave, not too far from Berklee college. During that time, there were some old musicians, black musicians, gentle folks. Just, they become one with the instruments, very quiet *you know*, neighborhood musicians. Every night I'd go there when I could, *yeah*. And then later on I look for arts, for jazz and music on the street and things like that everywhere I discovered. I became friends with many artists, *yeah*. Many artists, many musicians, actors, yes. You know, I would have never, there is no way I would be able to exist anywhere, in any foreign countries, if it wasn't with my connection with the art. There's no way. I don't imagine I'll be able to just be a parent, a worker, you go to work, you do your business, you come home. I don't think so, it would never, there's no way, it won't happen because it would not have been possible, there is no way. And then I get lucky. One thing too about the immigrant experience, there are some factors. One of the greatest factors is luck. You have to be lucky, one. And then second, your contacts, who you meet, your first connection, where you land, what's the atmosphere, what is it, *you know*. Yes it is true I had my background back home with art and that was important for me wherever I go, to find it, to look for it. But I got lucky I met with some good people too, *you know*. Here at work and then in the community, the artists, the musicians, the poets. Many foreigners, many artists, so we created that – big bonds of others in this new nation, but celebrating art with everybody, with everyone, you know, that was great.

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LR: Were there any people that you met at the Porter Square poetry location, or else, or in other places when you first came here that sort of first helped you get connected and helped you discover new places?

JDJ: It's so far away I can't remember who told me of that place, how I found it. Could it be that I was just passing by and I saw a bunch of people – Oh! I think I know what it is. I love books. Crazy for books. When I came here one of my greatest discoveries was to see [phone rings] how, how possible it was to buy books, *you know?* *You know*, I, with my little job I have access, I had access to money, I could buy books back home, *you know*, it was a luxury to buy reading books, yes. I did buy books whenever I got my paycheck once..., I would buy a book whenever. But I discovered Harvard Book Store, the basement downstairs in Central Square. Used books. Man I could get, you know I see books for a dollar, two dollars, that was crazy. And I would go around book stores, I think I went to that book store so; I think it's used to... called *The Cellar*. That was the name of it, The Cellar Book Store in Porter square, this one. And I think one day I was there and then I discovered the reading and I kept on going, but I don't remember anyone, I don't remember, it's far gone. Then, I went to the Cantab. You know the Cantab in Cambridge?

LR: Yeah, in Central.

JDJ: Central Square.

LR: Yeah.

JDJ: They had blues, yeah, blues. And at times they had some poetry too so, yes I circled the city looking for art, you know, and I met people. And later on, through City Night Readings, now I have a big database of poets and writers and artists that I have collaborated with and for a few years I did something at Harvard through ARTS FIRST. I had a festival that's called *The Art of the Words Festival*. It was for, from 10 in the morning until 6 pm. I had different artists, dancers, poets, writers, musicians passing on the stage performing, *so*. And I collaborated with a lot of people to do that. And I started to invite artists from other places, from New York, friends I met, you know. I met some writers also at UMass Boston through their..., there is a writer's workshop that happens every year in June, I used to go there. And then I used to follow readings, *yeah*. So poetry, poetry's my greatest connection. Poetry was my link, you know, the greatest link with being able to exist outside of Haiti because it seems that it allows – that allows me to not to look at myself as someone from another place but I am sharing

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something through that medium with other people, everyone from everywhere, from here, American writers, other writers from other countries, so we did that. And that's fun. And somewhat that becomes one of my identities, my main identity in living here, you know, I've been to the schools, to many schools doing poetry workshops with children, I used to go to this particular school in Cambridge for every year so children I met I worked with, they went on, they graduate, they became adult, they're parents. So I don't remember them but if I walk on this street you know when you do creative writing with a child who's 8, 10 years old, they remember you if that's an impact, you know, they remember that man, that guy from another country who told them a story, and then they started to write because of that, so, I, *you know*, I have this adult now, children I met, so, but that's a link. Yeah I have some wonderful stories with art. Sharing this art with people, *yeah*. There's one story that's a beautiful one, that's Isabella. When I started to do the *City Night Readings* in Cambridge, a friend of mine she came in and then once she came with a daughter of a friend, she invited them too because I invited them too. She was reading that night, and you know I asked that child who was there, would you like to participate? And she said yes to the surprise of her parents, they know they have a very shy child who will not talk to anyone, very reserved and you know she accepted and then she got to the mic, she shared her work, we talked about creative writing, and they were amazed, how can this guy do that? And next you know, I invited her to read as, you know – and this girl she developed in becoming a writer, she went to college, she wrote a lot and she continued coming to City Night but she still has the writing. She studied some big science stuff but nevertheless she's a writer, she's got that. I have some wonderful stories of that. But I miss theater. I do miss it, because the transition with poetry was easier, I could write you know, I started to write in English and I wrote more. Then I started to get invite– invitations as a poet so, for the audience here, English becomes the main language for me for writing. But for theater it was different, I was active, I was on stage, you know, so I, I had to wait for a long time until I was invited to participate in a project, but it was a play, a play in French by a French writer called Marie Ndiaye. So that was a project through the United Nations. I did that with another Haitian friend and a French friend, with three actors. So that was my only time being on stage as an actor in a play in this country. And I had to wait long and long until I wrote my own play, *you know*, I wrote my own. I have a play that's being performed now. It had been performed six times already in New York and in different places in Massachusetts. It's called *Your Voice Poet*. But I'm not in it, I wrote it. I can't, I don't have the time, can't do it, I have to exist, to work. Not enough time to work with actors or to try to perform it myself. Perform in it. But we do what we can and that's, you know, that's when I speak of immigration too. Life changes in many ways, many ways. *Yeah*. Immigration is very complex. There is the sound bites, you know, what the politician, the words they use and the words you hear on radio and the headlines and newspaper, but there's the tough reality about – the true reality about immigrant existence, immigrant's life. There are so many levels, it's not one line, this is not

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something you can just write a dissertation, a one paper about it. Yeah, so many layers of it, *yeah*. Yup. Of course my, my life has been transformed, *you know*, from what it started to be to what it's continuing to be here, *you know*. I don't know what my life would have been back home if I did not travel, with all the changes, with everything that happened. But I still remain connected with the place, through writing, through – it's difficult to completely surrender. I know it too well, I was too involved, *you know*, I was too involved in that place that made me, the way I discovered myself and everything else. Yeah immigration. That's a very complex subject. Very complex. And then now, having a family in this country, *you know*, this is it. Raising children, how to guide them, *you know*. What you can explain..., not everything you can explain. They have their own way, their own existence, the way they..., they're born here, their own reality. They share yours at a certain level but not all the way, *you know*. How to explain a place they've never seen? They haven't seen yet. And the place that keeps on changing, constantly, *you know*. I imagine my first trip now with my family back home, how to explain to – how to tell them, what you see, it's not what it was when I was there, yeah it's too complex, sometimes, silence, you take a deep silence and then attempt. You can't, can't explain it all. Words are not enough sometimes. *Yeah*. That's amazing, we're doing this about, you know, people's – the history of people migrating to Cambridge, living here, and then in the background we have the sounds of immigrants working on the weekend, cleaning the college (laughs). *Yeah*, that's a deep reality, these people cleaning, perhaps they are not the one with the contract, they are nameless. It's possible. This exists. But, how do you know about this? The common people cannot know that, *you know*, it's a different reality, you have to be in it. *You know*, I discovered things I learned things that my good friends, American, they will have never – they – it's not part of their reality, *you know*. Life is so, how I say, scattered, *you know*. It's mapped out, you do this, we do that, she does this, he does that, and *you know*.

LR: And it's also parallel too.

JDJ: Yeah.

LR: Because everyone is living like in the same places and working so closely and moving forward. But *you know* some people might not know about other people and *you know*, how – how they're here and what they're doing.

JDJ: So, I teach English literacy. Sometimes, in my classes I enjoy the first day, the reaction of foreigners, their eyes when I enter the class. I say "good afternoon, my name is Jean Dany Joachim, I was born in Haiti." *You*

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know, you see their eyes open big – “what! He was born in Haiti, he’s a teacher!” (laughs) I enjoy doing that, and to some of them, it empowers them, *you know*. And I use that to say yes, you too, regardless, if you do what you want to do, *you know*, we all have to start somewhere. You’re starting now, I started many years ago. So very soon it will be your turn, depends on what you want to do. But I am glad that I kept, I stayed with the art. You know, that’s why we met, that’s why we’re talking now. *You know*? It is, it is the poetry that connects me to people, writing, that’s all. It’s the art.

LR: And you mentioned that you organized some readings at Bunker Hill and you teach here as well, so I’m wondering how you first got involved with Bunker Hill.

JDJ: Oh – how did I – okay. When I came here, I, of course I could speak English you know, I, because through the story I told you through the hospital, I could communicate with them but when I realized the months – I was here for a month and I couldn’t stay – I couldn’t leave, I had to stay longer so I registered for – I took a class, I don’t remember, English class at Harvard extension. So it is when I went there, at Harvard extension, taking that class – at the end of this class, and the woman, the teacher told me, you know, I don’t think you need a course, an English class, you need to be doing something with the English language, because it seems that for that class I wrote so many – I couldn’t stop writing about home! And I believe this is the case for people, for immigrants, *you know*. When you’re away, you got that fixation writing about back home. I think for the English class I took, that class I took, everything I brought it to home, to home. And maybe to my writing there she said I think you need to be doing something. And then she said, she suspected that I didn’t have money, she wrote the name of Bunker Hill for me, and I came here. And I came to Bunker Hill, I signed up for, to take some classes for a program, to study something. And I didn’t even know, that was not my plan to study anything here, so what did I do, I had to pick something, I took computer programming. And, yeah, computer, yeah I did that, programming. So I started doing that but I was involved in, in student activities, doing things for them, you know, I discovered that place and before you know it I started to work there part-time organizing chess tournaments for them, projecting movies for them. I used to get paid 10 bucks an hour, that was a good deal, you know, to do that, part time...

LR: Was it in like, student – student affairs, or?

JDJ: Yeah, in student activities office, I remember that guy, his name..., Peter Saitta, he was the director of athletics. So I, I helped with one thing to the others and they kept on giving me little jobs, I helped with sports,

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with film, with... – and then, they wanted a liaison for another campus, someone to represent student activities so I got that job part-time. And then later on, they wanted someone to – they wanted someone to do programming in the evening for students so they asked me, since I'd been doing all these things, to sit in the hiring committee, to be part of the committee. So I sat there, and the way the format was at the time, being part of this hiring board, interviewing board for that, they didn't have set of questions ready, so people, you could ask, and I think we went to a few candidates, at the end the chairperson of the committee was a dean, he said, "wait a minute, why didn't you apply for this job – since this guy knows this thing so much, asking all these questions!" So when they didn't get anyone so that's the way I began since I was doing it already part-time. So, they decided ok, I can get my shot to do this job, and I started doing it. That's the way I started first to get involved here, doing programming for evening students to student activities office. So at that time, I already knew so many artists so now I had a real motive to do it. I would meet artists on the street, I started to bring all those street artists here, and you know for here it was an innovation because they didn't have that before, and for the artists I met at Harvard square or everywhere, I'll be going to see them, it was great to have, *you know*, the connection of the community college. And later on with faculty and staff, we created some different programs here, and until I moved on to other things *yeah*, that was the beginning of it. That's the way it started here. But even working in my job, working here at Bunker Hill, I still use the art in everything I do as the focus to help me, to help me maintain it, *yeah*. This is it. Art in general is the medium that allows me to be, *you know*? So I'm grateful for that. I mean, I don't have time to commit completely to the art, I wish I could have a job in the art, but it's okay. And then my experience in Cambridge as the Poet Populist, the Poet Laureate of Cambridge..., Cambridge called it Poet Populist, that was an interesting thing too. It is the art, it is my relationship with it. One night I was at home, I received a phone call, it was I think eight o'clock somebody called me "are you Jean Dany?" I said "yes" said "this is, we're calling you from the Cambridge Arts Council, this is just to let you know that someone has nominated you to be one of the candidates for the –" this is when the city was first going to do this program in 2007. I said "oh really? Thank you!" I didn't know, but it seemed that people who've been part of City Night Readings, or Sunset Poetry Series, things that I'd done, somebody had decided *you know*, put my name forward when the city was about to start this program for the first time. In 2007, I was – I didn't win, I was the runner up the first time, and the second time I became the poet of the city. That was fun. My dream was – what I did I mean, in that regard what I think I did that was exceptional, I brought many different voices together during that time, *you know*? My focus is not just the scholars, the intellectuals, the big one, big name poets or big name artists, but it's just to put it at the level of – the community level, everyone, give access, to put everyone together at the same table. And I did manage to do that. That was, *you know*, I am pleased that I could do it, and that, I think that's a good touch, to give the voice to children, *you know*, you have the big name

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poets reading and then next after that you have a twelve years old to the mic. I mean I think it's a good thing for both of them. For the twelve years old as much as the well-known poet, you know, you connect their humanities together. So I did that. And then, poetry in other languages, I mean, first my... – starting with myself, I always read in my native language. Wherever I go I want to honor that language, I always read something in Creole, always. And especially I had to work in translation a lot in the beginning, *you know*. When you start writing in another language, either if you want to admit it or not, but, you are working in translation. And then later on, I discovered translation, that's a beautiful thing, translation. I translated many – I started to translate the work of other poets into Creole or from these languages to English. First for me to discover them and later to read them, and *yeah*, that's fun. What else can we say?

LR: When you were the Poet Populist, did you organize readings, or where there, was there a project that you were doing to connect all the voices?

JDJ: Yes, I started a few things. First, I tried to initiate something that's called the Poet Populist Reading Series, that's a reading I think every month, at the Art Council. We didn't have too many, I think we had 3 readings because of schedule, because the office closes from, I think at 5 or at certain time for – to have the reading you had to go all the way to, to start from 7 to 9 or from 6 to 8 and that's overtime, that's too much money for... stay for at night to have people staying behind to close the building, so I couldn't continue it there. But nevertheless while being the poet of the city I kept on doing my City Night anyway, the City Night Readings. And I organized for those 2 years the Cambridge Poetry Festival, *you know*, I did that. A big day of reading where I brought many, over sixty poets, everybody, to read all day. So I did that. So then, *yeah*. At that time I already had a big database of poets, I know many, *you know*, between the schools, the different places, or all the readings I've been, so. It's fun. Life is good (laughs).

LR: And since then have you maintained a connection with the City after you were –

JDJ: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh what you asked me I didn't tell you – as a Poet Populist sometimes you did, for example I did, I did a reading at City Hall, I did some reading with, at nursing..., at homes for adults. *You know*, a few projects, you can...- you get invitations, you get invited and if you're willing to do that, that's fun, that's good. For example I did a reading, I went to a home for senior citizens in Cambridge and I invited another friend, a writer, we did a reading. It was great to see these people living there, at another level of life, but we brought back to them part of what their existence used to be. I remember there was..., there were a couple of writers

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there and that night was magical for them, *you know*, to do the reading there. And then, I think a few times I was invited to write something. I wrote something for... – there was a big night of reading by the river every year with the Revels. It's a group, singing by the river, and I had to write something just, the Poet Populist had to write something just for that evening, *yeah*, I did write. And yeah, I wrote a few stuff, I can't remember exactly what for but, *yeah* sometimes – and then going to school, to the school sometimes. But I already had the connections anyway in the city so, being the poet of the city just, made it official. But I – those are things I used to do before anyway. *Yup*. So what do we say, what else, what's next? What can we talk about?

LR: I'm also wondering about when you write in different languages, is there something that motivates you to write in English instead of Creole or does it feel different to write in – in the different languages?

JDJ: Oh, for example, a couple of weeks ago, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at a poetry festival. It's here, although the theme was translation, I knew there would be room for other languages, certainly but, the audience is – the audience is English, American, so. The main, *you know*, the focus... It's an American institution although it's in translation but, I had to write, you know, I wrote it in English, but I spoke of translation, I spoke of languages, and then of course I used other languages as part of the presentation. There was some reading, the way I did it, the keynote with some reading involved. So I had a few texts in Creole and in French and Spanish, *you know*, because, *yeah* we use that. But writing, how do I choose a language to write a particular text in – sometimes the text comes with the language, *yeah*, the text comes with the language, and you can always do translation later. You just surrender to the text and the language and the music it comes and then after that you, you translate it, if you have to.

LR: Have you ever translated things differently? Like from Creole to English or example, like have you translated a poem and then maybe like gone back and had a different translation?

JDJ: Um –

LR: Because of the meaning or...

JDJ: I – to do it, and then to do a second translation of the same poem?

LR: Mhm.

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JDJ: In the same language?

LR: Yeah, cause sometimes I've like read translations of poems from like Spanish to English and one translator has one version, and another translator – it's, and when you read them they just have different meanings and they like, feel different.

JDJ: Yeah, there's always, there's always room for that. I haven't, I haven't worked on the same poem to do two different translations yet but I'm sure if I have time to take a look back at things I've translated, I'm sure I would have new, now, I'll certainly come out with new nuances and new – because, for different reasons, I've been doing it for a longer time and translation is alive each time you look at it you can discover anything, it is possible, it is possible. But I don't – I wish to have the time to do that but, not yet. That will come, that perhaps will come. *You know*, wouldn't that be great to – I have so many unfinished writing projects (laughs), so many, you know, I have pieces of papers everywhere with words on them, every one is the beginning or the middle or the end of something, but that is not together yet. Hopefully. I will have time to do just that sometime. Yup.

LR: What has your most difficult project been?

JDJ: Most difficult project? I don't know, I don't have a – in terms of art not necessarily. I enjoy whatever difficult – difficulty that comes you enjoy it so, it's no big deal. I think the most difficult aspect for me into art celebration and creation is time. I have it in me, I love it, I would love to do it, I would love to commit to it but I can't. Yet. You see, right now to do this interview, you see I have to be away from, from the family you know, this is an artistic project, but – I celebrate that, I'm talking about poetry, my time here and now, leaving home, being here, but I have to be here and while being here I have a manuscript I wish I could be working on, and then I have projects to finish for other things so it's many layers. Time is the trouble. But perhaps nobody really has time, I don't know that's what I'm saying, but you have to work, you have to exist, you know. When you – when you're an immigrant, when you come somewhere, you have to start anew. I have to work for every little thing, everything, you know. I don't have – I can't tap into my mother's reserve or my father's or my aunt or what my family has created. No one has done it before, *you know*. Not only I'm trying now to exist everyday but at the same time, I have to be aware, ok, what foundation, what can I create for the children of... – that's, that's a complex things when you start, when you're the first one. I am the first level of it, so. And at the same time I have this particular relationship with art. I wonder does it make things better or is it complicated – or does it

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complicate things for me? I don't know but, I, one thing I know for sure, I wouldn't be able to, as I said it before, to exist without it. Here or even back home, *yeah*. I don't think so.

LR: And right now, what is your connection with home, with Haiti?

JDJ: Home is very complex. Many levels. There is this place that I know, it is when I close my eyes, it is all the memories, it is all the unfinished dreams, it is what it is not. It is all the dreams growing up and it is that place I can only see if I close my eyes. But when I think about the reality of home now, what it truly is, with all the natural beauties, with the sun that rises every morning, and you watch that wonderful travel over the ocean to set, the beautiful sunset all the time, with the rain, at time of rain, with the sky so beautiful at night, but it is also that place right now that breaks my heart, to see what it has become. The changes, the streets, *you know*, the houses, the *bidonvil* the shanty towns. It breaks my heart; I didn't expect my country to become that. That place I was born that was green in the time I was a child. I used to see the streets clean. Trees, there were trees. Now when you look, take a look everywhere you see the skeleton of the country wide open because the trees are no longer there in the mountain, and with the rain that falls every day you see the, the open carcass of the country with the sun that lit on it every day. That's crazy stuff. That's painful for me. It's a painful reality. But, there's a life - There's life there. The music, the voice, the sounds, and with all, with all the years living abroad *you know*, whenever I'm back *you know*, the colors, the people, the voices, the Creole, the smell of things you used to know, food, the different voices mixed together. So, home has so many faces for me right now. And I have so many ways to speak of it or to think of it, even to write about it. There's a home that I try not to think much of because it can put me in difficult places. That's the home that breaks my heart. When you imagine things are not getting better and they could have been better and, this is home that makes me realize that I am hopeless, helpless, there's nothing you can do. Even my words, they seem, what can they do here, you know? And sometimes I'm afraid to speak of home, I wonder what right do I have to speak of an existence that I am not part of. When you're watching people struggling, what can you say? It is complex. And home too is here! (Laughs) home is here. It's very complex, you know, I travel to Haiti and spend a few weeks and then finally when you say goodbye you feel your heart broken as you're saying goodbye but at the same time when you get to the airport here, you feel that sense of sighs I'm home. From home to home. I have a poem that speaks of that, I wrote it in - in two languages, English and French, that's the way it came, *you know*. Diaspora, from one - "From my city to my city, *de ma ville à ma ville*, I become the stranger" - and the poem continues to speak of the different levels of... - the voice leaving the country too early and the voice coming to another country too late, and the voice who can't be that voice that unique... - which cannot have a unique place because from one place to the other

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there is some unfinished business. So *yeah*, I have a poem that speaks of that. Home is now, I'm here with you, we're doing this interview. Home is also over there when I visit, when we're sitting, talking about life here, or eating some food that is unique just to that place over there (laughs). Yup, *yeah*.

LR: Are you still connected with the poets and the actors that you were working with before you moved?

JDJ: That's also another painful subject. Because many of them – many of them, they don't exist anymore, they died, for different reasons. *Yeah...*, very few..., many of them. I carry the memories of many, many of them. Things we used to do, plays, songs we used to sing together and, the laughter... That's it, *yeah*. But I'm in touch with some, and many of them still, like me, live somewhere else, *you know*, in the U.S., in Europe, some of them in Haiti but no connection at all with the arts, *yeah*. *You know*, life travels, life continues, yup.

LR: When you first came to Cambridge, were there any places that reminded you of home in Haiti? Or, made you feel more at home?

JDJ: I would say Cambridge, Cambridge particularly, when I come – came to Massachusetts, made me feel..., what I – what helped me the most, I landed at Harvard Square first. I stopped at Harvard Square, the first thing I bought in this country was flowers. They took me to a flower shop that was there..., doesn't exist anymore, I went there..., it's closed. Just to be around that kiosk at Harvard Square. So I went bought flowers before they took me to the hospital to visit my friend, I went with flowers. And then later on, that's the place I continued to go early on and what was unique – I didn't know why yet, at the time – it's because I could see everybody, people from everywhere. And I love hearing the languages. It's only later I discovered, *you know*, it's a school with all the students from Harvard from different countries and all the tourists and that's what made it unique. So although I was here but I didn't have the feeling that I was in anybody's country, you know what I mean? I felt that we were many here. This is not truly the face of Cambridge, *you know*, as it is Cambridge, you know? But nevertheless, that's my – that was my first impression and I'm glad. That worked out for me because I felt at home, *you know*? I felt at home. But all these people, they didn't belong to Cambridge per se, but somewhat they belonged to Cambridge because Cambridge allowed that place, to Harvard to be there with all the tourists, all the artists coming to perform, summertime at Harvard Square and, *yeah*, that was... – because I could see the difference because early on I would go to other places, I'll take a trip to Dorchester, *you know*, and I'll take a trip somewhere else to other places when you find some different unique community where it's not everyone together, so. Not– *yeah*, that's the sense of home that I got when I came here, because of that, of seeing

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everybody. But at the same time I remember too, taking the train, when you're in the Red Line, you sit in the Red Line and the train is going on going down, down, down, down – by the time you get to a certain point, it's just Black. Mostly Black people, you know, when you get to Fields Corner, to Dorchester, to that part. And I used to go take long walks into Washington Street in Dorchester because that reminded me, *you know*, to see all these Black people together that made me feel of home and *yeah*, I didn't know much about the complexity of race in this country. I didn't know about dangerous places, you know, difficult places, with certain time, until somebody had to tell me, "No no, no! Don't go walk there at night! It's dangerous!" Until I started to read in the newspaper, I saw there was a lot of killings happening at night, a lot of shooting during that time I arrived here. But it was mostly in that area and this is where I discovered a lot of Black faces. I'll just take the train to – and then walk in Washington Street. I remember I'd go to Dudley, take the train or the bus to Dudley and I saw all these Black people, vendors on the street, and I saw a chess player, this guy playing chess. He's selling stuff but he's also playing chess, and *you know*, back home I was involved – I had so many lives that I told you – I had a chess club at home at my house. So I started playing chess with that guy – come to Dudley station, from Cambridge to go there playing chess. But until I discovered the chess players also at Harvard Square, so I spent a lot of time playing chess at Harvard Square, a lot a lot – day and night. So many, many things, *yeah*.

LR: Were there any other places in Harvard Square, like cafes or restaurants or venues that you went to at the beginning?

JDJ: One thing I did early on is to discover so many different foods going – you know, I would walk here and each month would go to a different restaurant to discover different flavors, *yeah*. Following food art and music, you know I, I did it, you know, I did it. Until after a while I said "Ok, now I'm gonna cook." You know, I'll cook at home, invite people, invite friends. *Yeah* I've done a few things too because I remember my first Thanksgiving or my first holidays, you know the holidays in this country when people are together so, what I did, I would invite people to my house, I would cook and invite all those people I know who have no family, no place to go so I kept that as a tradition so that's, we did that. My house was always open, during that time. Yup. It's an interesting travel, and it's fun, life is good, what can I say?

LR: Did you connect with other Haitian migrants here in Boston, Cambridge?

JDJ: Oh *yeah*, certainly. I met, *yeah*, at different levels, *you know*, different levels, different level of life; of course if I'm here from Haiti I had to, I had to know. It was a Haitian family that welcomes me to Cambridge. I was

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passing, you know, they... – it was for a month, they knew I was going to stay here for a month, that was fine, all arrangement was made, I had the room. But although, for the month I slept mostly in the hospital, I was there every night. That was my house, you know, in the hospital at night, with my friend there. But nevertheless that was from there, so, I also was discovering the Haitian community. I was invited to..., to places to see life, to see their businesses. You know, one also aspect of the immigrant life, it is wherever you go as an immigrant to discover life of your people differently than what you used to know at home in the country of origin. For me, that was quite a learning, to discover my people here, *you know*. And I believe it's the same, somewhat the same for other folks, from other countries.

LR: Cause it's sort of another, it's like a hybrid identity that forms because you know, you're not in your country of origin anymore and you're not from the country that you're in so, you're this, you have to like create this new identity.

JDJ: Yeah, even, even for example, I discovered radio station, they were involved, you know theater, there was Haitians doing plays, there were, I heard of radio shows but, for me it was, *you know* I had to step back to look at all of that. I just came from home, leaving theater, leaving radio stations, leaving everything and then to hear it to see the differences, how it's happening here, and how it is done at home, so. It's all that. Yes.

LR: And have you also connected to the wider Caribbean community in Cambridge?

JDJ: The wider Caribbean communities. I – how to answer that. It is not that, there is not really a place to say let's get connected with the Caribbean, it's..., it's through art, *you know*? I used to go to..., there's that place, oh my God, what's the name of it, on Prospect Street. It doesn't exist anymore, it was a music place. That had different Caribbean bands performing. After that, how does it happen? Churches, music, the school, I mean. Especially for Black immigrants, when you're on the street when you're Black it's..., there's no way to tell if you were born in Roxbury or in Haiti or in the Bronx, it's..., it's very difficult in that regard to say – because they don't have big businesses to say oh that's a big block for Caribbean markets, you can buy all the food from the Caribbean or Caribbean clothing and thing like that. You'll find a little bit of that in different places but not as there's a place for you to see that, to have a particular connection, *you know*. It is in the artistic celebration you can see these manifestations, *yeah*. I... – I follow, I reach out – I look for art everywhere. You know in the beginning I..., when I came here, when I realized, I discovered A.R.T. American Repertory Theater, I wouldn't miss a show. When I found out, at the... there was something in Cambridge that's called Square Deal, it is a big

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booklet of, of coupons. And I always looked for a coupon for the A.R.T. where I can pay half or whatever, very little. I didn't have money but I could pay very little. And then later on I discovered I can work as an usher, I can usher for the show and then go another day, so I'd do that. I'd sign up to do these things. I followed theater like that. I went to the lyric stage in Boston, to different places. I called them to see can I usher you know, so I..., I *you know*, I followed arts everywhere. But, *you know*, I knew something I needed, so, through that I did it. And then jazz, and later on having connection with musicians, I go to their gigs, I'm invited to go, *you know*, free plays. And then meals, parties, you know when people gather, that's one way the – *you know*, the party, the house parties when people gather together, group of people. And eating, and singing. Just existing that's a way, so that's, yup.

LR: And I know that you mentioned that your children haven't been to Haiti –

JDJ: Haiti, no.

LR: Yeah, but I was wondering if it's important for you that they are connected with that Haitian heritage or if through other ways you've sort of introduced it to them, or if you plan on going to visit soon.

JDJ: Oh yeah, I wish, it's... – if I had money I would have done it, it's expensive. Now we are 4, *you know*, there is myself, my wife, César, and Danyson, it's four plane tickets, *you know*. Unfortunately, *you know*, it's a bit expensive for me now, we can't do it all the time and we will do it but... – but it's not only in traveling. For example, with Danyson, Danyson speaks Creole completely Creole. Since he's born, he was born, that's the language we speak. So, he's never been to Haiti but he speaks the language and the music, *you know*, he knows Haitian music, Haitian *you know*, he knows – I mean at the same way we listen to a lot of jazz, Miles Davis, Coltrane, he knows those people the same way he knows art – it is to... – that's what I have, that's what I share with my people. The food we cook and, *you know*, and the connection with talking to people back home. The same way we are connected with friends and artists in other countries, in France, in Spain, so we call – he has that relationship with all the..., the artists, the poets, the people I know here, American and others, *you know*, he knows my friend musicians here and so this is... – he knows, he knows I was born in Haiti and he knows he was born here. But that's funny, he's six years old when we talk he says "How do we say this in our language." *you know*, for example, for words. We... – he refers to the Creole as "our language" *you know*, but he knows, that's the language we speak with each other. Even in the crowd we speak English with other people but the two of us we always speak Creole. We started it like that so I'm lucky it still stays like that so that's one way – at

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least he has the oral language, *you know*. Writing it is... – will be another story, but at least he can somewhat speak it, he has that. Is it important for me, for him to know? I mean he knows, I don't know, I mean you... – one must know your history, everyone, *you know*, he will know that his father – he already knows that his father was born in another country, his father was raised in... – I try to tell him my life as I can remember it, *you know*. As much as I can I try to tell him. Not as..., because he must know, but it just happens, *you know*, conversation, *you know*. He will ask me questions, “Did you have that?” and one day he said “Why were you born in Haiti?” something like that, “*Poukisa ou te fèt an Ayiti ?*” *you know*, “Why were you born in Haiti?” And I told him because it was there my mother was, it was there my father was from, *you know*. With our children..., questions. *Yup*. And I try to give him a lot of exposure to..., to music, to Haitian culture, drumming, because he's..., because he's born with the skills of drumming, he's a drummer, so we go to a lot – we don't miss a jazz concert. We have connections with a very good jazz band here called The Makanda Project. Since he was 2 years old we never miss..., we seldom miss a concert of this band. Because we have access, they're free concerts at the library by great musicians. So we do that a lot. So at the same time there is a community of Haitian drummers here for a dance class on Saturday. I make the time so he can see, he can be part of it. Why not? If it's here he can do it. So, that's a little thing I can do for him. *Yeah*. So that's part of the story that I can tell you.

LR: Yeah. I think we're slowly wrapping up.

JDJ: Ok.

LR: Is there anything else that you would like to add about Cambridge or, the immigrant experience, or anything that's like, been on your mind that we haven't touched upon in the interview?

JDJ: I love, for example, I travel, *you know*, through my art, through poetry I go to new York, I go to other places for presentations – I love to go to any place and come back to the quietness of *you know*, Massachusetts and Cambridge. And it reminds me of the way of life in the place I was born, *you know*. The day rises and then the night comes, *you know*, there's a place, things close. I remember before... things, us...- places did not close here at 2 o'clock. They had to push for things to stay late into 2 o'clock. I like that sense. And I mean Cambridge, the same way, that's all I know, *you know*, it will break my heart to have to leave it, but at the same time there's a reality, there's a big economic reality here in Cambridge, it's expensive, very expensive. That's a struggle but I'm sure we'll find a way to make it work and I hope, and I imagine that might be a reality for many other people trying to stay here. The place is fine, you know, it's wonderful, the different projects, the – even this program,

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can you imagine? You are trying to do an oral history of the people who live in the city. So that means you are – you must have certain comfort, you know, people are thinking, people want to preserve, to do things, but they have the means to do it but, life starts getting to be very expensive, and not everyone can afford it, *you know*. And it can happen that we lose a lot of people. And – but there is wealth, you know, that’s – that’s the condition of... – part of the human condition, that’s the situation of the world, the economic situation, when you know life gets so and so expensive and there’s an abundance of money but not too many people have access to it, *you know*. I have a job, I do extra, but nevertheless it’s very expensive. You know, why the rent has to keep on going up? You know? If I have to take another job, another job, so just to face the rent, there’s... – there would be no place for art, for poetry, not to write a play not to do... – and life like that for me will be not living. Just to exist, to eat, to pay rent, to send your children to school. It’s just the basic stuff, *you know*? In any society, *so*, I hope the city will keep its humanity, it’s important. I mean I’m... – I have no choice, I’m part of it. I live here forever, I will do my best with what I can do, but.... And what else would I like to say? I don’t know. I suspect with a project like that you can talk forever.

LR: (laughs) Yeah.

JDJ: You can talk forever.

LR: Yeah.

JDJ: Yeah. I am grateful, you know, this is a place that makes space for art and I hope it continues doing so. And also to look at all its people. *Yeah*. Yup. Hope so... I met some very interesting group of people, community leaders, people you wouldn’t believe – wonderful people, they are involved. I met this woman, Lori Lander, God this woman, she’s an organizer. Have you heard of her?

LR: I have, yeah.

JDJ: Yeah, she’s in everything, she’s a force, you know. And that’s great that the city has people like that and she’s not alone and they mean well. *You know*, I collaborated with her on a few projects. Gun buy-backs or, the Many Hands Project, something to get stuff for homeless, finding money for gift cards for shelters or food pantry, I mean she’s in everything and that’s great, *you know*? And this is someone who’s trying to give back. It’s not because she’s one of the recipients of these projects so that’s, it’s good that that exists and I hope more

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people in the city do that type of work. I mean I don't have money to offer to any of these programs but I give my time, because I believe in that community work. Even sometimes you know, at church I think of it... I feel..., I say how do I feel, I don't have money to give, *you know*. I can't, I don't have it, *you know*? And I know some people they give but I don't have it and these money things always come back but, I give time. As much as I can, *you know*. I give my time, I give words, give some poetry (laughs). I don't know, what do you think? What should I talk about? I don't have a closing special words as a speech, no, nothing. I am grateful that part of this project makes me think of some very important people in my life, *you know*, my aunt, my mother, the place I grew up..., I makes me think of that street, life in it, the changes, it ma...- this project makes me think of my upbringing, *you know*, it's like you close your life and you're looking at yourself growing up, the different things I did, *so*. That's good. Talking about my first steps into discovering the art of writing, the art of poetry, the stage, you know. Rodrigue Montfleury, that guy I met who died too young, great actor, great poet, a great *sanba* as we say back home. A *sanba*, someone who creates. He writes songs and poetry, words, *yeah*, all these people. And places this project make me revisit – makes me revisit in my head, that's, that's good, thank you.

LR: Thank you! I was wondering also, a question related to the project. What would you like to see as a result of the project?

JDJ: I have no expectations. I am satisfied for the time we talk about it so, whatever. If it's somewhere people have access to it, that's great. Schoolchildren to hear the voices of these immigrants among them, not much the adults but the children at one point. Perhaps if this can be useful for people doing research who say, "huh, who lived here, how did they live?" I am sure the other people you met, they have different things to say than what I said, *you know*, different lives... – to see different immigrants, but different ways they exist in their life. I think that can be useful, for other generations to know, who's among them, *you know*. Imagine someone who is born in Cambridge who never..., you have no connection with other countries. Yes of course your parents, grandparents, came from somewhere but, *you know*, two three generations of American they don't know of their past, especially if they're White there's no need to really dig into it. So, it will be good for them to know that things like that exist. Give them the voice of the immigrants, in their own words. That's a good project. That's a good city that can afford something like that..., it's good..., I'm glad there are people thinking about doing such things, and that's why I'm glad that I landed here. That's why I hope I'll stay here, *you know*. It's a cool place. I love the Charles, I, as a runner... – you see, I have my life as a runner... – I have many lives everywhere, *you know*, running, I train... – running in almost all the street of this city. Winter, doesn't matter, all

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around, I used to train all season, so. The Charles River. *Yeah*. Harvard Square. Other quiet streets.... Many places.... So no particular expectation, I am fine with all of it.

LR: Ok.

JDJ: Alright, thank you.

LR: Yeah, thank you so much.

JDJ: Thank you. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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