In this interview Joel Sati, PhD Student in Jurisprudence and Social Policy, UC Berkeley & JD Candidate, Yale Law School, discusses growing up in Kenya, Tom and Jerry, growing up in a religious household, moving to 'the most backward town in America', being compared to a piece of shit, getting suspended for plagiarism, moving to Maryland, assimilation, Swahili, drama club, smoking pot, Dem Franchize Boys, System of a Down, Iago, religious doubt, discovering he was undocumented while applying for college, diving into philosophy, suicidal thoughts, turning it around and enrolling in community college, New Atheism, Ricky Gervais, Obama, DACA, and the Dream Act, moving to NYC and taking classes at CCNY, encountering discrimination working at a world famous NYC eatery, being homeless in the thick of the polar vortex, how his view of the world was affected by the death of Michael Brown, Charles Mills, co-teaching a course as an undergrad, working as a community organizer, getting prepared for grad school at Stanford and Rutgers, getting into the Berkeley Jurisprudence and Social Policy program, the relationship between epistemology, law, and 'illegalization', fake news, white guys in dreads, election 2016, writing an op-ed for Washington Post, going to Yale Law, the internet and groupthink, George Yancy, the future of philosophy and the country, Kate Manne, Miranda Fricker, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, open borders and reparations, Migos, Michael Che, Dave Chapelle, Ali Wong, and his last meal…

[7/9/18, photo credit: Bianca Waked]

When and where were you born?

I was born Thursday June 3, 1993 in Nairobi, Kenya at 9:30AM at **Aga Khan Hospital**.

Earliest memory?

I was 5. I remember my mother bringing me to her workplace, a travel agency. I remember annoying her coworkers by alerting them to words they spelled wrong. I was a pretty good student in nursery school.

Where did you grow up? As a little kid, what did you do for fun?

I grew up all over the place, but the place I would call home is **Umoja II**, which is a suburb outside of Nairobi. Growing up, I would play games with the other neighborhood children. Hide-and-seek, hopscotch, that kind of stuff.

What were you scared of as a kid?

Every night I would sleep completely under the covers because I was afraid a thief would come into my room and cut off my head!

Jesus Christ! Sports? Favorite cartoons?

Growing up, I enjoyed playing hide and seek, hunting grasshoppers at the field behind my school, and playing soccer with **whatever we would find made into a ball.** As for cartoons, I was a huge **Tom & Jerry** and **Pink Panther** fan. Also, there was this Kenyan sketch show called **Redykyulass** that would air Sunday nights that I lived for.

What was your family like? What did your parents do for a living?

My life was pretty normal, for a Kenyan family. I don't remember us wanting for much, even though my mother would come to the conclusion that we had gotten as far as we could in Kenya. My father wasn't really in the picture; he would end up passing away when I was six. My mother worked at a travel agency in Nairobi. I also have a sister who is thirteen years my senior. Practically, I was an only child since she was already in college when I was.

What does your sister do?

She's a business analyst at the CDC in Atlanta.

Religious household? Philosophical?

Very religious. I remember we went to this large tent church in Umoja every Sunday. For the children, there would be times where we would get up in front of the congregation and recite bible verses. I was pretty good at it, save for one time I had stage fright; it was the one (and I think the only) time my mother said she was ashamed of me. My mother did raise me bilingually, which makes sense given that she had been angling for a move either here or the United Kingdom for some time. When I was six, my mother asked why I was a Christian, and when I told her it is because I was born as such, she demanded that I reject that answer and find my reasons. Ten years later, I took her up on the challenge, and realized I did not seem to be as committed to religion as my family and peers were.

So your mom felt like your potential was limited in Kenya. When did you move?

I moved to the US in October of 2002. And as soon as I arrived in the United States, I was detained in Detroit for seven hours and almost sent back. I write about it in the story "**Fifteen Days**."

> I don't know who said what, but it didn't matter; the death knell was sure to have been struck. My American dream was to wilt before my watery eyes and before I knew it, I was bawling – hard. The tears stopped in time to overhear Mama Joseph pleading her case. I was more than some kid being smuggled into the States; I was a boy who missed his mother. All this 'thinking about my mother' business had me sleepy and quite hungry. I fell asleep, head firmly on that metal table, mind certain of deportation. I then felt a touch, which turned into a bump, which matured into a raspy and industrious female voice whispering "Hey, bud, wake up!" I sneered at her, then at the clock- two hours had passed. "Ya feelin' nervous?" she asked. I nodded, my mind having left the country by now. "It's gonna be okay; you missed your other flight because we had questions to ask your friend. We're just calling your mom in Atlanta and we're gonna make sure everything is accounted for—-we just can't be that lax anymore, ya know?" she continued. I was going to ask why not; then it hit me—-still does. To defuse the awkwardness, I looked for something and saw her gun, which looked cool. "Can I shoot—-uh—-touch it?" I hesitated, infantile impulse having been arrested by my better angels. "Fat chance of that happening" she shot back, the reply hitting me with bewilderment before I understood that it meant I was neither going to shoot nor touch the gun any time soon.
>
> After a long pause, she got up and motioned to me as if I was to walk with her, and I reluctantly followed. We walked for what felt like two minutes, past a sign which screamed ALIENS, and into a room with a few chairs, a television and a solitary vending machine. I stared at the machine, and then I remembered that I hadn't eaten since Amsterdam. "I sure as heck am hungry–how about you?" she said, having noticed my gaze at the machine. I nodded again, this time more vigorous than last; maybe my mind was returning to my body. "Have a seat, I'll be back" she said before wandering off, with the television in the far end of the room booming "GIANTS BEAT THE ANGELS AND WIN GAME FIVE OF THE WORLD SERIES!!" in the background. Knowing nothing about baseball, all I saw these normal-sized 'giants' do was run around a diamond-shaped piece of ground. They somehow won, making an officer at the far end of the room curse his luck—so much the worse for his better angels.

I always think about this experience these days, with **the Muslim Ban** as well as the **separation of children from their families at the border**.

How did your views on things like race change, living in America?

The first place we lived was **Kennesaw, Georgia—**for starters, it was once labeled as **the Most Backwards Town in the United States**. Hyperbole aside, that such a title would be considered for the place wasn't all too undeserved—but this is me speaking from my current perspective. Back then, coming from a country where damn near everybody was Kenyan (they were obviously Black but I didn't see them as such as a child), race wasn't much of a concept even as I lived in the South for the first five years of my American life. Yet I knew from the jump that I definitely did not fit in.

One of the worst experiences I had starting—which I didn't fully understand until years later—happened within the first few months in Georgia. We were in Mr. Kuhn's 4th grade class watching a video on the digestive system. The video had gotten to the point where the feces made its way through the intestine. The girl sitting next to me tapped my shoulder then pointed at the screen. "You see that?", she pointed to the piece of fecal matter, "That's you!" I remember getting sent to detention for saying "What the hell?", which was surprising because I thought everyone in America said that! What the hell?

Inspirational teachers?

Growing up, not a ton. I would say my 8th grade band teacher at Palmer Middle School, **Mr. Dietrich**. He instilled a love of music that I want to return to, and I deeply regret not following up with him, even though he left his email in my yearbook.

As a teenager, did you get into any trouble? Did you enjoy high school?

High school was fine. I had moved to Maryland from Georgia to in the summer after 8th grade, so it started out with me not knowing a whole lot of people at a time when who you socialized with was everything. As time went on, I had enough friends that I felt secure in my social status, even though I definitely wasn't cool, and I wasn't a magnet kid either. Also, I moved out-of-district beginning my sophomore year, so I would take hour-plus trips to school on public transportation for the remaining three years. As for getting into trouble, I got suspended twice for plagiarism. I think it was a result of not managing time and not being aware enough to ask for help, so I took shortcuts. They were both in-school suspensions, and since I figured being a bad boy was not in my bones, I swore to never do that again.

So, you didn't know you were an undocumented immigrant. Do you know why y'all moved to Maryland? Was your mom worried about being deported?

She was. Before I knew why, I had always thought the move to Maryland from Georgia was a bit abrupt. Years later, she would tell me that Georgia was inhospitable for immigrants, so she decided to move. I'm not sure what the policy was then, but it was some flavor of really bad (the more things change, the more they stay the same I guess). But back when I didn't know that I would be deported, I was not worried.

Did you 'assimilate'?

As an immigrant, my teenage years were an identity crisis I didn't have the language for. I was an immigrant without a doubt, which separated me from my peers in school. And since I had come to the United States at a young age, my **Swahili** began slipping, so I did not exactly identify with the Kenyan diaspora I was around. Perhaps most important, I would not find out I was undocumented until my senior year of high school.

Still, in many ways I became part of American life. I had a group of friends I played soccer with at **Richard Montgomery High School**. I did the whole Homecoming/Prom business. I was part of my high school's drama troupe where I acted, directed, and been part of the crew. Perhaps the most transformative experiences of my time doing drama was acting in **The Laramie Project** and directing a one-act play titled **The Angel Intrudes**.

I smoked pot and partied on occasion as well.

Least favorite subject in High School?

Wind Ensemble. Not for the subject matter, but there was something about that class that made me quit playing the **Baritone**.

Favorite subjects?

IB (**International Baccalaureate**) Theatre with **Ms. Davis**, **AP** Psychology with **Mr. Kuney**, IB Sociology/Anthropology with **Mr. Stillman**. Mr. Stillman was a great teacher. He seemed to treat me like a person in ways that most teachers would not. I would also say AP Lit with **Ms. Leckie** was a highlight as well.

Favorite books? Music?

Huge fan of **A Series of Unfortunate Events** by Lemony Snicket. I also had (and still have) a weird love for **Othello**, particularly **Iago's villainy**, which I came to appreciate thanks to my AP Literature course.

I am not what I am! Music?

I had an eclectic music taste, ranging from **DJ Unk** and **Dem Franchize Boys** to **System of a Down**, **Switchfoot**, and **Panic! at the Disco**. Also, I'm a huge fan of film scores, drawing from what I used to play most during band.

There's a dash of dirty south in there. Interested in sports?

Having first immigrated to Georgia, most of my sports allegiances are based there. I'm a fan of the **Atlanta Falcons**, the **Atlanta Braves**, **Atlanta United**, the **Atlanta Hawks**, the **Atlanta Thrashers (RIP)**, and the **University of Georgia Bulldogs**. Also **Chelsea FC**!

Extracurriculars?

I was interested in what kids my age would be interested in: video games, girls, soccer, and not flunking out of school--but it's not like I did well in school either.

Did you turn it around? Any interest in philosophy back then?

In the summer of 2009--I had finished my sophomore year of high school--I had come to the conclusion that I needed to turn my life around. My grades weren't good--I had been kicked off the JV lacrosse team for a 1.98 GPA--and I didn't care about church all that much. So when I went down to my sister's house that summer with a commitment to reading the Bible and being closer with god. Also, I did not want to be a Christian because I was raised as such; I wanted to be a Christian for my own, positive reasons. I read the Bible cover-to-cover, and I found myself in complete disagreement with enough of what I found to seriously doubt my religion.

Did you start thinking about what you wanted to do in college, if college was even on the table? Where did you apply and why? Who wrote your letters or recommendation?

My plan at this point was to be a surgeon; I was vacillating often between **cardiothoracic surgery** and **sports orthopedic surgery**. At the time, I was really interested in medicine; I took Anatomy and AP Biology, and was part of a group of high school students volunteering at a local hospital. I had applied to Drexel, Mount St. Mary's; there were other schools but those are the only two I remember.

What was the college application process like?

So in September of 2010 I was applying to colleges. I got to an application that asked for my Social Security Number. I thought I had forgotten it, so I planned to ask my mother what it was when she got home. When she arrived, I asked her, and she dropped the news then. I was absolutely stunned, to say the least. And though I would end up spending the rest of the school year trying to keep things normal, things were not. I committed to **Mount St. Mary's University**, who gave me a pretty sizable scholarship. Even then, I had to pay $10,000 for the fall just so I can enroll, and my family could not afford that. So I called the university, decided to turn down my spot, and spent the 8 months after high school sulking at my sister's house in Georgia.

Were you worried you would be deported?

Even when I found out I was undocumented, I either didn't think I would be deported or just suppressed the possibility from my mind. Also, given that the plight of Black undocumented immigrants is still underreported, I don't think I would tip anyone off about my lack of status. I also have a pretty American/Anglo-sounding accent, so people don't automatically think of me as an immigrant, let alone an undocumented one. I remember doing a feature for a local DC news station that summer. When I went back to my high school for the first time after that feature one of the teachers said to me "Joel, I didn't know you were illegal!" It still shocks some people today, though that occurs decidedly less often than in previous years.

Terrible. What did you do for 8 months?

It was during this period of personal crisis that I delved deeper into philosophy. Around this time, I read a lot of things on atheism and the philosophy of religion, and became familiar with the work of a lot of people in **New Atheism** among other things. Perhaps the most influential book I had read on this topic was **Arguing for Atheism** by Robin Le Poidevin. It was through this book that I came across **St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas**, **Leibniz**, **Paley**, and their respective arguments for the existence of god. At that point, I became engrossed in philosophy of religion, with a focus on

Leibniz's theodicy. Examining his arguments as to why god exists despite the world's imperfections, I turned such arguments inward; if god exists and had a plan for me, why should I be in this spiraling depression?

Right. How did your mom find out you were an atheist? Was she angry?

So I had "come out" via Twitter—I put it in quotes because I really didn't think much of it and still don't, to be quite honest. Yet my sister and brother-in-law took it quite seriously. I was staying with them at the time, and they expressed concern that if I told my mother, my mother might disown me. It was something I was deeply afraid of. I still resented her for the situation I felt she had put me through, but I loved her at the core of it. Around Thanksgiving that year, I told my mother, and her response stuck with me. She said, in Swahili, "kila mtu atauchukua mzigo wake mwenyewe"—it loosely translates to "each person carries their own burden"—and left it at that. She would still try to convince me, but at this point it really isn't brought up. Not because it's untouchable discussion, but because to me it doesn't matter as much. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Why do you find new atheism incorrigible?

As for why I find new atheism incorrigible, there's an elitism and pompousness about its figures that rub me the wrong way. The fact that its most prominent proponents are wealthy white academics doesn't help in that regard. On the pompousness note, I think having humility in the substance of one's views and in how one expresses them is critical, because at the end of the day people want to be talked to as people. Do not get me wrong—religion should be subject to rigorous critique both as worldview and as praxis (on the latter point think **megachurch pastors who want million-dollar private jets because commercial aircraft are metal tubes full of demons**). I saw my mother work herself to the bone and pay rent late to give money to churches whose leaders lived comfortably. I am not ready to forgive that. Nevertheless, there is a Ricky Gervais quote that as always stuck with me, which I'm going to paraphrase: "**When you're a single mother, Jesus is basically free childcare. Before my mum left for work she'd tell me 'The Lord's watching you' and I wouldn't move.**" My mother is the best person I know, and I wouldn't tolerate anyone looking down on her based on what she believed, my gripes with those beliefs notwithstanding. In addition, the church provided a way for me to interact with other kids in the Kenyan diaspora, so I had a built-in community.

How dark did things get?

Lacking purpose, let alone a plan, I became deeply depressed. During the depression, I had come across the story of **Joaquin Luna**, an 18 year-old Arizona man who took his own life after graduating high school and finding that there were no options for work or school; this was long before **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals** ever came onto the scene. Even though he didn't save his own life, I credit him with playing a critical role in saving mine. I contemplated taking my own life but decided against it, in large part due to the efforts my mother made to enroll me in community college. Thus, in January 2012, I began at **Montgomery College** in Rockville, MD.

Was that it?

I took—and still take—it one day at a time. I think having goals and pushing toward them kept me sane. Having the professional goals I have makes the tough times bearable; it is impossible to do what you set your mind to if you don't believe you have a mind worth putting forth. But it was not all grit, and grit is not sufficient in the least. I just couldn't afford anything else.

Did you ever get professional help?

It was not until graduate school that I had access to health insurance and could regularly see and afford a therapist. Health Insurance is the best thing (not categorized as my advisors, who are not just things for that matter) about grad school. Health insurance saved my life, and having it convinced me that everyone should have it.

If you could go back in time, and give yourself advice, what would it be?

If I would give myself advice, it would be that high school is not the end of the world. I think that I had a lot of big ambitions that felt completely dumpstered the minute I found out I was undocumented. I regretted not taking high school as seriously, and I felt like a waste of potential. I was also a compulsive liar, which I think was me trying to keep up appearances among friends much better off than I. I remember having my friend's parents drop me off at the nice new apartment complex across the street from the old one where I lived. I wish I didn't have to do all that.

When did you get into politics? Obama implemented DACA, and Maryland implemented DREAM around then, yes? How exactly did these policies affect you?

I got into politics in the Summer of 2012. One of my now closest friends, **Yves Gomes**, was doing work on the **Maryland DREAM Act** and immigration reform. I remember reaching out to him about how to get involved one day; the next day, he picked me up and we went to **CASA de Maryland** (later on, I would work with **United We Dream**).

Around the same time as the Maryland DREAM Act, **President Barack Obama announced DACA**. The program allowed undocumented immigrants who arrived as children to receive a two-year functional reprieve from deportation. DACA recipients could also receive a work permit and a social security number (for work only). From that, recipients could then go to state DMVs (this varies) and get licenses and IDs. It provided a bit more normalcy to life, though not much. I'm currently working on my fourth renewal.

Was community college what you expected?

No, only because I had no expectations. Given that I only expected my family to afford one semester, I wanted to do well in the classes I took because I liked philosophy. And I enjoyed the classes a lot. My favorite classes at Montgomery College was probably my introduction to philosophy class and the intro to ethics class. In the phil 101 class, I had decided to come in hot with my philosophy knowledge in much the same way as a self-labeled expert who had only read one book on the topic. But the professor, an adjunct who also did social work in Baltimore as his day job, really facilitated my curiosity. I'd come to him with **Carnap** and he'd respond with "Have you read **Quine**?" I had no idea what I was reading, but that was not the point. Just the interaction fueled my curiosity.

How did your views on education change?

I also met a lot of nontraditional students. Seeing people go to school while having families, jobs, and other commitments gave me a lot of perspective; maybe I didn't have it that bad. I saw people learning for its own sake and on their own time, and moving on to wonderful opportunities thereafter. I became more confident about doing things in my own time, and not feeling like I am in a race with anyone else.

So you were doing well?

Due to my performance in the first semester, I was able to secure scholarships to continue my education. Still, there were shortfalls. I remember being $700 or so short to cover my Fall 2012

tuition, and not having been able to come up with the money by the due date. On the due date, I opened up to Yves that I probably would be forced to drop out. He then offered to cover the shortfall, on the condition that I pay it forward; I continue the project of paying it forward to this day.

I've been there, man. How did you make the jump from community college to CUNY academically and financially?

It was pretty exciting, but it was incredibly stressful. New York City is an incredibly expensive city, and **CUNY** policies were (and maybe still are) inhospitable to undocumented students. Given that, for example, I could not receive scholarship money over and above tuition for living expenses, I feel that much of the stress I went through in undergrad was completely avoidable. Though I loved my time as a student, as a young adult trying to keep my head afloat I hated how CUNY policies surrounding undocumented students worked tirelessly to get in the way of my education. I was homeless or otherwise housing & food insecure for my whole tenure at **CCNY**, and a lot of that was avoidable. I still resent the CCNY administration, and probably will for some time.

I assume you had to work as an undergrad?

I did. My first job was as a minimum wage job at a coffeeshop in Washington Heights. I would work the closing shift, which meant I would head home close to midnight during weekends and some weekdays as well. Writing my papers and doing my readings at 2AM was a regularity. The boss was a bit of a sleaze; for example, at one point he owed me six weeks' back wages! It was surprising I wasn't homeless again.

I worked at a fancy restaurant in New York City's West Village. I took a job as a barista there, working weekends and some weekdays from before service to well past midnight. It wasn't out of the ordinary for me to get home at 3AM. A lot of celebrities frequented the place; I've seen **Brooke Shields**, **Judd Apatow**, **Ellie Kemper**, and **Nick Kroll**. I even served tea to **Salman Rushdie**. I remember **Hilary Swank** saying hi to me while she was waiting to use the restroom, and Brooke Shields being quite tall. As far as any politics are involved, it was a strange dynamic; the servers were all white men, and the back-of-house staff were all immigrants, myself included. I remember a back-waiter who stood up to the servers, only for the servers to conspire to see him fired. I never saw him again. There were a lot of racialized interactions, and I swore to myself that if I could get

out, I would. Having seen a lot of immigrant exploitation—even in the immigration nonprofit space—I decided I would focus my work on how immigrants are regarded.

Important professors? Mentors?

Richard Bernstein and **Lynda Dodd** of the **CCNY Political Science Department** and **Jennifer Morton**, **Kate Ritchie**, and **Ben Vilhauer** of the **Philosophy department** were amazing professors. I remember picking each professor's brain about the rigors of grad/law school, and their honest answers helped in my decision. In addition, they were very amenable to doing an independent study with me or looking over my application materials. As for classes, my favorite courses were Jurisprudence (Dodd), Philosophy of Race (Morton), Philosophy of Language (Ritchie), Early American Political Development (Bernstein), and Philosophy of Law (Vilhauer).

I was also part of two great honors programs: the **Skadden, Arps Honors Program in Legal Studies** and the **City College Fellowship**, pipelines to law school and graduate school respectively. **Jen Light** and **Nildania Perez** at the Skadden program and **Susan Besse** and **Renee Philippi** at the City College Fellowship were very helpful as well.

Tough times?

I was homeless in **the thick of the polar vortex**. A month or so prior, I had been working as a production assistant of sorts for Pulitzer Prize-Winning journalist **Jose Antonio Vargas**. It was great because I would use the money to help pay for February 2014 rent. At the time, I was living in half of a living room in an apartment in Harlem. I was incredibly poor at the time, poor enough to barely be able to afford the $300 monthly rent for my meager space. When February 1st came around, the check didn't. My then landlord/roommate kicked me out. So for the rest of that day I was outside in 6ºF weather, in the thick of the polar vortex. Thankfully, my friend David came all the way from Brooklyn to help me move my stuff to his place, where I stayed for a few weeks. And he risked being kicked out—as his school didn't allow non-students to live in his space. Before that came to a head, the staff at the Skadden program found me a place to live in the dorms for the rest of that semester. You know the strangest part of that semester? I got straight As. How? Beats the shit out of me.

haha…so, who did you talk to most about philosophy and related topics back then?

I would exchange ideas with a group of four or so friends, in particular **Shaila Bora**; she's now a philosophy PhD student at Villanova.

You got a chance to teach as an undergrad, is that correct?

In August 2014, the death of **Michael Brown** made it really apparent to me that no matter what I do in life, it all could end with an ill-fated encounter with police. I became more curious about my identity as both undocumented and black, with each aspect of my identity making me particularly vulnerable to **ICE** and police. The semester before I taught the class I did a research project reading as many texts about the Black experience in America as humanly possible and attended protests. All this gave me a more grounded sense of self. These experiences further contextualized the intersections of my being black and my being rendered illegal by the law. I came to the recognition that is law is to play an integral part of the anti-racist project, those committed to social change must expose and exorcise the specter of racism that has seeped into our legal institutions. This culminated in my crowning achievement at CCNY: co-designing and co-teaching the inaugural **African American Political Thought** course with Bernstein in 2016. This remedied the school's decades-long lack of such a course. The class explored many books, from established classics as **The Souls of Black Folk** by W. E. B. Du Bois, **Black Feminist Thought** by Patricia Hill Collins, and **The Racial Contract** by Charles Mills, to contemporary tours-de-force **Citizen** by Claudia Rankine, **Between the World and Me** by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and **The New Jim Crow** by Michelle Alexander.

What did you do to chill?

There wasn't much unwinding back then; if I wasn't doing schoolwork I was either volunteering at immigration nonprofits (I should have been paid, to be honest) or working in the NYC restaurant business. When I could barely afford it, I would take the **Vamoose** down to Maryland to see my mum.

Where were you volunteering?

I would do work as a community organizer for **African Communities Together** in the South Bronx in 2014 as well as with the **New York Immigration Coalition**.

From the day you started at Montgomery and your last class at CUNY, how did you evolve as a person?

I was quite sheltered in some sense, and living in New York City opened my eyes to how messed up the world can be at times. But I learned a lot of myself as well, especially how resilient I can be. I learned the importance of having a support network, and standing up for oneself.

Most importantly, I learned radical compassion. I try to be understanding of people's situations and the varied, rough paths people take to get to where they are, be it educationally or otherwise. I learned the importance of mentorship, something that will be a central piece of my pedagogy.

Nice. When did you start thinking about graduate school?

At the time I started at CCNY, I didn't think too deeply about grad school or anything like that. But in the summer of 2014—the end of my first year at CCNY—I took part in the **Stanford/CCNY exchange**. The program had 10 or so CCNY students from disadvantaged backgrounds to do research in the humanities with Stanford faculty. I got the chance to meet wonderful philosophers such as **Blake Francis**, **Patrick Taylor Smith**, and **Brian Berkey**. I had the chance to work with **Eamonn Callan** and then-visiting professor **Han van Wietmarschen**.

It was an amazing summer, for many reasons. I learned how to do independent research, exchange ideas with other philosophers, and confronted feelings of impostor syndrome. I remember telling Professor Callan that my project, which argued that undocumented immigrants ought to be eligible for citizenship, seemed to be going nowhere, to which he responded, "Argue what you care about." In that simple moment, all my fears—ranging from "Am I an impostor?" to "Why am I wasting my journey of upward mobility on philosophy, of all things?"—went away. I came away from the experience convinced of both philosophy's potential as an engine for justice in our time and of my capacity to help realize this potential. It was transformative to know that I could do the work that is important to me. Most importantly, I could see myself as a philosopher and in a graduate setting. In addition, I would send drafts of my writing sample to my Stanford mentors.

I still keep in touch with them all these years later.

Who, if anybody, helped you through the process of applying to grad school?

As for applying to grad school, professor Jennifer Morton was incredibly helpful in the process. She supervised the independent study where I developed my writing sample, and was honest about the rigors of developing a competitive application. She and I also had conversations about upward mobility, facilitated by her extensive work in that area. Kate Ritchie read multiple drafts of my

statements of purpose. Also, the **Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers** covered the bulk of my graduate applications. I would not have been anywhere close to affording it otherwise.

Also, in the summer of 2015 I took part in the **Rutgers Summer Institute for Diversity in Philosophy**. It was a great week. I remember talking philosophy with **Howard McGary**, **JLA Garcia**, **Doug Husak**, **Ernie Lepore**, and **Elizabeth Camp**. McGary told me that I have a bright future in the discipline, which was huge for me to hear right before I began graduate applications. McGary also introduced me to the **Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy**, which represented a welcoming community where I could talk philosophy with people who look like me.

Kind words mean so much! Could you explain why talking about philosophy with people who look like you is important, for somebody who might not understand?

When I first got into philosophy, I thought I would fail at it. Though I was interested, I did not see myself succeeding since I did not see people who looked like me. And even when I read Black philosophers, their inclusion seemed tokenized and tacked-on. And even the demographics of philosophical discussion lack Black minds; there are many graduate courses I take where I am the only Black person. All that said, talking philosophy with other Black thinkers gave me the affirmation to answer the philosophical issues important to me regardless of whether said topics are orthogonal to what is considered "canon." One of the most important pieces of advice was by one of my interlocutors in **SSAP**. He saw me completely mute during a discussion and he said to me "As a philosopher you must engage, even if only to ask the time." Those words remain with me still.

Where did you apply?

I applied to a number of schools around the country, both in philosophy and political science. I don't remember the full list, but my top choices were **Berkeley Jurisprudence and Social Policy**, Rutgers Philosophy, and Princeton Politics.

Where did you get in?

Berkeley Jurisprudence and Social Policy, Rutgers Philosophy, CUNY GC Politics, University of Washington Philosophy, Penn Philosophy, UC San Diego Political Science. I was waitlisted, and ultimately rejected, from Princeton. I ended up picking Berkeley, and I don't regret the decision in the least.

Was it hard adjusting to a program that isn't a standard philosophy program?

Let me begin by saying that, as an immigrant, you learn to adapt to situations that are ostensibly non-ideal and make your subsequent experiences work in light of them. My plan choosing among graduate schools was this: I wasn't motivated by a particular discipline; I would select the program that would allow me to ask the questions I wanted to ask of the world, and the support to hazard interesting answers. JSP was that program to me, and it has lived up to my expectations. That said, I do wonder what I miss out on being in a straight philosophy department on occasion. But even as a philosophy major at CCNY, I took classes well outside the department that turned out to be influential in my work. So I was not daunted by not being in a philosophy PhD department; I could still be a philosopher, and that is what matters. To wit, taking classes with **Chris Kutz**, **Sarah Song**, **Josh Cohen**, **Veronique Munoz-Dardé**, and **Kinch Hoekstra** have improved my abilities as a philosopher immensely.

The first semester took some getting used to, since my PhD program requires that all first-years take a graduate level Statistics course. That was rough, but I passed and that's what matters. Outside of that, it isn't much of an adjustment. Since the JSP program is interdisciplinary, I can take courses in whatever department I choose with little administrative/curricular pushback. If I did want to take philosophy graduate courses, I can and often do. Outside of philosophy, I've taken a course in Italian Theory (it's where I got introduced to **Agamben**, **Gramsci**, and **Bobbio**). This fall, I will be taking a class at the Berkeley J-School that dovetails well with my work in the social epistemology of journalism in politics.

What are your classes like, compared to a standard philosophy seminar?

Not too different really. For example, the courses on Moral, Legal, and Political philosophy are taught out of JSP (by my wonderful faculty advisors Chris Kutz and Sarah Song), and cross-listed with the philosophy department.

Berkeley also has the **Kadish Workshop in Law, Philosophy, and Political Theory** on most Fridays during the academic year. So far, I have had the privilege of commenting on work by Jennifer Morton (my undergrad advisor), **Charles Mills**, and **Joseph Carens**. This coming semester (Fall 2018), the theme is "Free Speech and Democracy," which is as timely a theme for philosophical seminars as any I can conceive of. Also, **Alvin Goldman** frequents the Workshop; it is through the workshop that he and I are co-creating a working group in **social epistemology** with

a few other Berkeley professors and graduate students. I have been able to do the work that I always desired to do in this program, and I would not have it any other way.

What's the relationship between epistemology, law, and immigration you think?

I think the relationship between these three topics ought to be the philosophical problem of our time, and with the mass detention of immigrants and separation of families at the border, I don't think I'm too far off the mark. My scholarship examines epistemic issues in contemporary discussions of normative citizenship.

For example, in a current project, I explore what I call "Illegalization." "Illegalization" is defined as the legal-institutional processes that dehumanize certain people by rendering them as illegal. "Illegalization" works because adopting this conceptual lens indicates a marginalization of noncitizens that is ongoing; its dynamic quality is thus faithful to the noncitizen experience. Illegalization is the product of a historical, social, and epistemic process, where noncitizens are robbed not only of the ability to make sense of their human experience, but are also excluded from the public, social realms where legal, moral, and cultural meaning is produced. Illegalized persons are not only unable to interpret their experience in legally intelligible terms; if and when they do put forward legal argument, they are not given due credibility owing to their identity, and their case suffers.

In another project, I'm examining the extent to which misinformation endangers democracy and political discourse (SPOILER: A lot). If a more just world inheres somewhat in including marginalized groups in the discursive sphere, misinformation and the echo chambers that result make it practically impossible. Otherwise convincing arguments have no weight if the discursive space we think is necessary for their currency is nowhere near being reality.

When it comes to law, our views on illegalized immigrants are intelligible through and solidified in law. I find that dehumanizing immigrants stems from their being seen as unmoral, not merely immoral. Immigrants, having no concept of right and wrong (otherwise, why would they enter illegally?) are unfit to be part of the citizenry, who are moral. And when it comes to how we metaphorize immigrants, be it as a wave, a plague, or a virus, such phrasings affect what policies become palatable in political discourse, legislation, and even judicial interpretation. When it comes to work on metaphor, immigration, or the link between the two, people to read are **George Lakoff**

and **Mark Johnson**, **Keith Cunningham-Parmeter**, Elizabeth Camp, and...myself. I have two papers coming out on these topics within the next year. #shamelessplug

#millennialsputtingrandomhashtagsoneverything

haha...hey, how would you describe Berkeley to somebody who has never been?

Berkeley is really weird, but on the whole it is a really nice place. The weather is not too hot, and not too cold. Still, very rarely is it "just right." There are **white guys with dreads**, which is unsettling. It's also **quite the bubble**. I will also take this opportunity to say that the area near campus is a food desert--get a damn grocery store near campus! Lastly, Berkeley, like the Bay, is becoming more expensive while not dealing with **the problem of homelessness that is very apparent**. Thus, I feel there are a lot of opportunities for left leaning, well-meaning liberal folks to do something to help the least of us, and that opportunity is being squandered.

What was your election night like?

I live around left leaning, well-meaning people in Berkeley. Everyone thought of the election process as elongating a foregone conclusion. There was a clear difference in quality between candidates, so I thought people would see it and vote for the one who was not a racist/sexual abuser/every other bad thing. I think the saying "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good" really applies here, at least in its non-application. I remember watching the election at a friend's place; **it was quite the party starting out**. But as the reality set in that 45 would be president, I was devastated. The next day, I was in mourning. It was as if I had lost someone close. People cried in our grad seminars. But the day after, things had to proceed as normally as possible. That has been my modus operandi ever since.

Could you describe your op-ed in the Washington Post?

I wrote "**How DACA pits 'good immigrants' against millions of others**," in response to the **DACA rescission in September of 2017**. The weekend before Attorney General **Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III** made the official announcement, there were a lot of people sympathetic to DACA who were arguing for its retention. Much to my dismay, they brought out the tired tropes of "they came through no fault of their own," "they pay taxes and contribute," and other related drivel. In the op-ed, I argue that framing DACA along the dimensions of perfection and possible contribution separated these "good" immigrants from those without unaccented speech, high GPAs,

and outsized ambitions. I wanted to make it clear that we can make a case for the retention of DACA, not based on how special DACA recipients are, but as an indicator of why it is necessary to regularize the 11 million or so illegalized immigrants in this country.

How did you get in touch with Washington Post?

So I have to thank **Andrea Lampros of Berkeley Law's Human Rights Center**. I reached out to her in her capacity as communications director and told her that I had some thoughts that would make a fire op-ed (this happened around the weekend before the official announcement referenced above). I spent the weekend writing the piece, which came out a couple of days after Gen. Sessions's announcement. I got a lot of support from my friends and colleagues, and getting to write that will continue to be a career highlight.

Yeah man. Any hate mail?

Not really. I've had the occasional alt-rightie tag me in a tweet to ICE, but nothing has come of that.

Woof! You're brave, dude! Do you find yourself looking over your shoulder? Like you are going to show up to comment on a paper and BAM, ICE agent!

Nah. Not because I have no reason to fear them, because I do. But if I let the fear metastasize with all that is going on with my professional career and personal life, I really would not be able to get out of bed. I have a support network that has promised to protect me if shit went down, and I love them for that.

Nice. Where do you want to end up? What do you want to do? Philosophy?

My desire to have a deep understanding of the law in its own terms motivated my application for a JD at **Yale Law School**, where I have been accepted and deferred enrollment until the fall of 2019. I want to be a law professor with a cross-appointment in a philosophy department. Also, if my status does end up being regularized, I would like to teach abroad for a bit, and even give some lectures in Kenya. I also want to be a public intellectual involved with society's most pressing issues.

Interested in advocacy?

I want to advocate for the rights of noncitizens as well as help others from underrepresented groups to become philosophers. My ambitions are admittedly outsized, but where I am was once an outsized ambition, and that didn't stop me now did it?

You landed a Paul and Daisy Soros fellowship. That's a big deal!

I'm so excited to have won in my third time applying. I'll get to meet the rest of the fellows this fall--I'm so stoked! Most importantly, **the fellowship** will support my JD/PhD plans, both financially and professionally; I'm incredibly humbled to be among the fellows.

Ah, I see! Favorite philosophy websites?

The first is **The Stone**. **George Yancy**'s writings on race as a demographic, philosophical, and social problem within the discipline/through the lens of the discipline

The second, which I lump into one "site," are the sites for **PISKI** and the **Rutgers Institute for Diversity in Philosophy**; the work these two programs do for diversifying the discipline is incredibly critical (pun intended).

Third is **Scott Shapiro's twitter account**. I asked him how he's so good at Twitter to which he replied that it allows him to be a jackass--his term not mine. One of the few things that gives me hope when most social media gives anything but.

Also there's this website called **"What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher?"** I think it's cool.

Never heard of it. Social media: good or bad for philosophy and politics? Seems to invite confusion and empathy seems in short supply. Encourages group think. Thoughts?

I think politics have been bad enough to the point where social media doesn't really do much. Nevertheless, I do think empathy has suffered in a way that social media doesn't really help alleviate. There's a lot of aggressive **groupthink** and what I feel is a tendency for **cancelling those who are less-than-perfect** as well as **self-aggrandizement**. Social media's tendency to encourage self-interested curation of one's persona at the expense of intellectual humility is not a good mix. That said, the rise of **social media as a workaround to gate-kept knowledge is significant**. To the extent that social media is an inextricable element of contemporary political discourse, **its capacity to have people from underrepresented groups to make their voices**

heard is very cool to see. There's a lot of fallow philosophical ground to work vis-a-vis social media, so I'm interested to see where that work goes.

Yeah, a mixed bag. How do you see the future of philosophy?

There's nowhere but up to go from here. My conception of "up" being more inclusive of underrepresented groups. That said, philosophy is at an existential crossroads whereby it must be more imbricated in contemporary debates, leaving the academic silos. Generally speaking, **contra Marco Rubio**, I think we need more philosophers (or, at the very least, more philosophy majors). I have a little mantra: If you want to change people's views, get into politics; if you want to change the debate, get into philosophy. I believe it is high time to examine the assumptions grounding our fractured discourse, and seek to change those. Maybe then will marginalized communities secure the kind of sweeping change en masse that we desire.

Future of the country?

Who knows.

Will Trump get re-elected?

Will 45 get re-elected? Maybe this is an overcompensation for the underestimation in the general election season, but my presumption is that he will be re-elected unless and until there is positive evidence to the contrary. Such evidence will only arrive on the first Tuesday in November 2020. That said, the rise of **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** gives me hope that progressivism with a spine of moral concern for all will make its way to government at all levels.

What can we extrapolate from the Ocasio-Cortez victory, you think?

Socialism isn't the "thing-that-will-not-be-named" that it once was, and this victory makes it a mainstay in lay discourse. I think her victory will inspire younger, left candidates to run, giving established Democrats the fire under their butts that they so desperately need.

So, if you were President of the United States, or king of the word, what would you do about immigration?

Open Borders. I never understand how someone can claim a moral high ground over someone else just based on being born on the right side of an arbitrary line. Moreover, I think we can achieve a

better world when we understand that the well-being of others ought to be as important to us as our own. People like Carens and **Ayelet Shachar** are on the right track when they argue that citizenship is the contemporary iteration of a feudal privilege. Time to do away with citizenship as society currently conceives of it.

Also, reparations for slavery and the ill-effects of white supremacy. And then I'd step down, move to a small town somewhere, and begin a goat farm/cider brewery, and let someone who's a much better fit for the job than I would be take a crack at being Earth's supreme leader.

So, it seems like we forget that even though politicians can have a profound influence on public opinion, they are also tools, by which I mean, representatives. What do you think would be the most efficient way to change the minds of the people who elect politicians who push an anti-immigration agenda?

Vote the politicians out. It's not sufficient I must admit, but it is definitely important. As a cranky, erstwhile activist, I'm to some extent over the "hearts and minds" approach to changing views of those who take as assumed questioning my humanity. I say disruption is the most effective way to change minds; direct action gets the goods.

What do you have in mind when you say, 'direct action'?

Something **like Black Lives Matter activists in Seattle disrupting a Bernie rally**, which resulted in a needed update re: his platform. Stopping traffic, voting out political dinosaurs, etc.

Most important thinkers out there right now, in your mind?

The people who are working in social epistemology are doing what I believe to be consequential work. I think it is important to examine how social elements influence individual cognition as well as how we conceive of collectives coming to "know" things.

Yeah, I dig that stuff. Any people in particular?

As for specific names, I think **Kate Manne** is doing important work on misogyny that, for example, explains how overqualified women are still unable to secure important positions because of underqualified men. Also, **epistemic injustice** is important in a time when underrepresented groups make concerted efforts not only to be part of public discourse, but to be influencers within them. To wit, I look up to **Miranda Fricker**, Charles Mills, and **José Medina**.

Other thinkers who are doing the pressing, important work are: **Gloria Origgi**, **Regina Rini**, **M.R.X. Dentith**, and **Axel Gelfert**. Also, with regard to a (I think much-needed) resurrection of a **Popper-Rorty debate**, I respect the work of **Justin Cruickshank** and **Raphael Sassower**. I also want to give a shout out to **Adam Riggio** and the **Social Epistemology Research and Reply Collective** (SERRC), which I have the privilege of claiming membership in.

Lastly, I'm going to include my partner **Bianca Waked** (one might say I'm biased, but I don't care). She's doing work on the causal capacities of language, and their relevant implications for social and legal philosophy.

Nice! How'd y'all meet?

At a philosophy conference in Flint, MI! The hilarious part about when I met her was I had just stopped dating someone who thought she knew more about Africa than me because she studied monkeys in undergrad.

What? I'm sorry, go on.

I had sworn off love, and was definitely not looking for anything. That's the thing about life; it happens when you're too busy making plans.

Back to the conference. The first day, there was a presentation on racial bias. I asked a question about what conception of race the presenter was using, as it wasn't clear. Apparently that piqued the interest of another philosopher in the room. At a later presentation that day on immigration, she invited me to sit with her. After that, we began talking over lunch. She turned out to be incredibly brilliant and witty, and we hit it off really well. On the last day, I had to leave early. So before I left I told her we should keep in touch, and I wanted to get to know her—I had to shoot my shot.

Nothing much happened in the few weeks right after. And then I get a text with a photo of two people. The first is Bianca. The second is Pitt PhD student **Vivian Feldblyum.** Viv and I went to high school together in Maryland, and she went to undergrad with Bianca at McGill—really small world! Bianca and I exchanged messages, and it wasn't too long before we'd be sending each other good morning and good night messages. At some point in the New Year we said to each other "are we basically dating?" and the rest is history!

Best philosopher you disagree with most?

Karl Popper. In some sense I am a **Rortian** in contradistinction, but I am still working out those nuances. A close second is **Tommie Shelby**, when it comes to **Rawlsianism's fitness for racial justice**. Charles Mills really influenced me on this. That said, I should have that all sorted come comprehensive exam time!

You have done a little stand-up. Favorite comedians?

I still do a little standup--I'm hilarious because my whole life is a joke! My favorite comedians are **Kamau Bell**, **Michael Che**, **Ali Wong**, **Roy Wood Jr.**, **Trevor Noah**, **Russell Peters**, **Aamer Rahman**, and **Dave Chapelle**.

Love Chapelle. Che might be my favorite right now! Favorite TV Shows?

Favorite TV Shows are **The Wire**, **Westworld**, and **Insecure**. I should also add The Good Place.

HBO forever am I right? Movies?

HBO is clutch. Shoutout to my sister for giving me her account info. My favorite movies are **Black Dynamite**, **The Paper Chase**, and **300**.

Music?

Young Thug. **Rich the Kid**. My favorite artist is **Migos**. I think they are leagues **better than The Beatles**, and I am willing to fight anybody on that. [editor's note: **check 'em out**]

So good, so influential…'The Carters' are ripping them off! Last meal?

Ideally? The rich.

A close second is a **ribeye steak** that I prepared **sous vide** accompanied by some vegetables to be determined later (just not **broccolini**). To drink, a cider that I brewed.

Thanks for your time, Joel! Can't wait to see what you do.

[interviewer: Cliff Sosis]